2025 MLB PREVIEW

THE METS COLLECTION

APRIL 2025
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Photograph by
JEFFERY A. SALTER

Sports Illustrated

JUAN SOTO IS A WORK OF ART AS A HITTER AND A GAME-CHANGER FOR NEW YORK'S ETERNAL UNDERDOGS

From left to right:
Pete Alonso, Mark Vientos, Juan Soto, Sean Manaea, Francisco Lindor, Edwin Diaz *and* ***Brandon Nimmo***

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LINEUP

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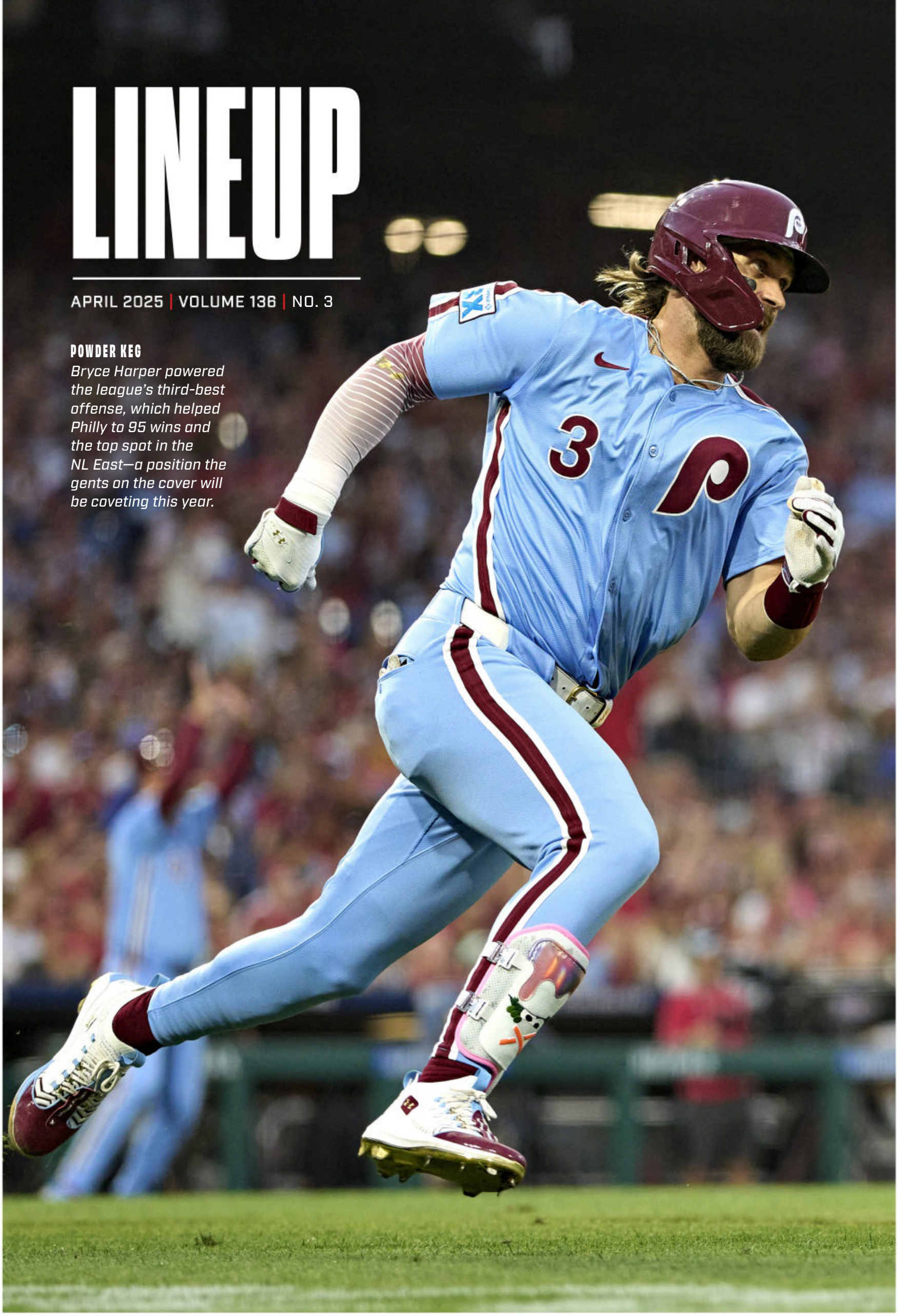
POWDER KEG

Bryce Harper powered the league's third-best offense, which helped Philly to 95 wins and the top spot in the NL East—a position the gents on the cover will be coveting this year.



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LINEUP

2025 MLB PREVIEW

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ERICK W. RASCO

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SCORECARD

ESSAY

Southern Crossover

THE FOOTBALL-MAD CONFERENCE OF SHUG JORDAN IS NOW A HOOPS POWER MICHAEL JORDAN WOULD LOVE

BY PAT FORDE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG NELSON

WHEN LOSING looked inevitable in the final minutes, many of the people who had made Coleman Coliseum a cauldron of noise during the biggest college basketball game in Alabama state history started filing out in bulk. And with 47.2 seconds left, here came the jarringly loud insult to injury:

"It's great! To be! An Auburn Tiger!"

A surprising number of visiting fans had infiltrated enemy territory, paying steep prices on the secondary market to do so, and they were loud and proud at the end. This Auburn sass triggered one Crimson Tide backer sitting in the section behind one of the baskets seemingly more than the basketball itself. He raised his hands to his mouth and booed in response with a trembling fury.

Moments later, after the 94–85 Tigers' triumph in Tuscaloosa went final, another Alabama fan leaned over the railing to berate the officials as they left the court.

It was almost like these were basketball schools.

"I've never heard Coleman this loud," Auburn coach Bruce Pearl said after the game.

Thus on this February Saturday in 2025, the Iron Bowl of basketball (IBOB, in the local shorthand) was very nearly as heated as the more famous chinstrap version of the rivalry. The state of Alabama is arguably the nation's capital of college football—not just all the winning, but the pervasive interest.

The Southeastern Conference motto, "It Just Means More," has always been attached to the gridiron—but here and now it is more appropriate for hoops. Auburn and Alabama came into the matchup topping the AP and coaches poll, respectively. It was the first time in SEC history that two of its basketball teams played in a No. 1 vs. No. 2 game, and that's something that's never happened in the football Iron Bowl.

Big as it was, this game is merely the headwaters of the SEC's flooding of Hoopsworld with unprecedented power. Earlier that day, the NCAA men's basketball selection committee unveiled a top 16 one month ahead of Selection Sunday that might as well have been sponsored by Waffle House. In addition to Auburn and Alabama, Florida was on the No. 1 seed line as well. Tennessee and Texas A&M were No. 2 seeds. Kentucky was a No. 3.

Downstream from there, the league's strength keeps flowing, as more than a dozen SEC schools had a case for inclusion in the field of 68. That came about thanks to the work the SEC did in November and December, as teams that would later struggle during the brutal conference slate beat up on powers such as St. John's, Michigan, Arizona and Louisville.

BRIANNA PACIORKA/NEWS SENTINEL/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES (ZEIGLER)

VOLUNTEER ARMY
One of many experienced players in the league, Zeigler re-upped with Tennessee for a fourth year.

SHOWING UP
Thanks to crowds like Bama's, the SEC sat (or stood) poised to break the Big Ten's 47-year stranglehold on the NCAA attendance title.

To sum up this murderous conference, let's go to Vols coach Rick Barnes, who has also worked in the Big East, ACC and Big 12: "It's the best league in the country, maybe ever. I mean it's ridiculous, to be honest with you."

How we arrived at this point, where a league that for decades consisted of Kentucky and apathy, is a matter of commitment and financial wherewithal. They decided to care.

Go back to 2013, when only three teams from the conference made the NCAA tournament. The league had just won seven straight football national championships, which gave everyone an invitation to not care about the plight of hoops, but they began digging out shortly thereafter.

Better coaching hires led the way. In a cultural fit for the SEC, they didn't go out and get a bunch of choir boys. Pearl was hired at Auburn while still serving a three-year show-cause penalty for having lied to NCAA investigators while he was the coach at Tennessee. Alabama coach Nate Oats had a player charged with murder in 2023 (Darius Miles, who pleaded not guilty) and refused to sideline other players who were at the scene—most notably star Brandon Miller (who was not charged with a crime). Florida coach Todd Golden navigated a very public and awkward Title IX investigation that ultimately was dismissed by the school.

Reputations aside, the wins have followed. Pearl took Auburn to its first Final Four in 2019. Oats took Alabama to its first last year. The current Florida team is the school's best since Billy Donovan was there.

Armed with huge media-rights revenue, the SEC schools have committed financially to their coaches—and their players. The NIL era hasn't solely been a football feast; SEC schools have paid their basketball players well, too.

If there was one consistent thread through the league's top teams this season, it was an ability to retain veteran star players. Auburn got a third season out of former Morehead State big man Johni Broome, who might be the second-best player in the nation. Alabama was in Year 3 with Ohio transfer Mark Sears and Year 2 with North Dakota State transfer Grant Nelson. Florida kept former Iona guard Walter Clayton Jr. for a second year. Texas A&M got a fourth year from All-American guard Wade Taylor IV, as did Tennessee with Zakai Zeigler.

Plugging those stars into an entertaining style of play made the SEC must-watch TV this season. The games were fast and fun, the teams were largely athletic and unencumbered by overcoaching.

The ultimate validation of the SEC's strength, as always, comes in the NCAA tournament. There is still some proving to do there, where the league's last title came in 2012 (Kentucky) and the only school outside of Lexington to win a title in the last 30 years is Florida (2006 and '07). Tennessee and Missouri have never made a Final Four; Texas A&M has never made a regional final; Kentucky is on an ignominious run of early NCAA flameouts.

That pressure has ratcheted up. For fans not hardwired to love basketball, that style of play—plus winning—is the added incentive. Kentucky isn't the only program loving the roundball right now.

Kevin Scarbinsky has covered college basketball in the state of Alabama for 40 years. He

remembers times on the Auburn beat—when the Tigers were really good, with Charles Barkley and Chuck Person—and few people cared. That included the athletic director, who was also the football coach, Pat Dye.

One day after football practice, Scarbinsky says he asked Dye if he were going to the game that night. "What game?" Dye responded. The basketball team was playing its season opener. Another time, an Auburn exhibition basketball game had to be moved 30 miles east and across state lines, to Columbus, Ga., because an REM concert had been booked in the basketball arena without looking at the hoops schedule.

"They averaged a little over 7,000 fans a game," Scarbinsky says. "Now you can't get a ticket there."

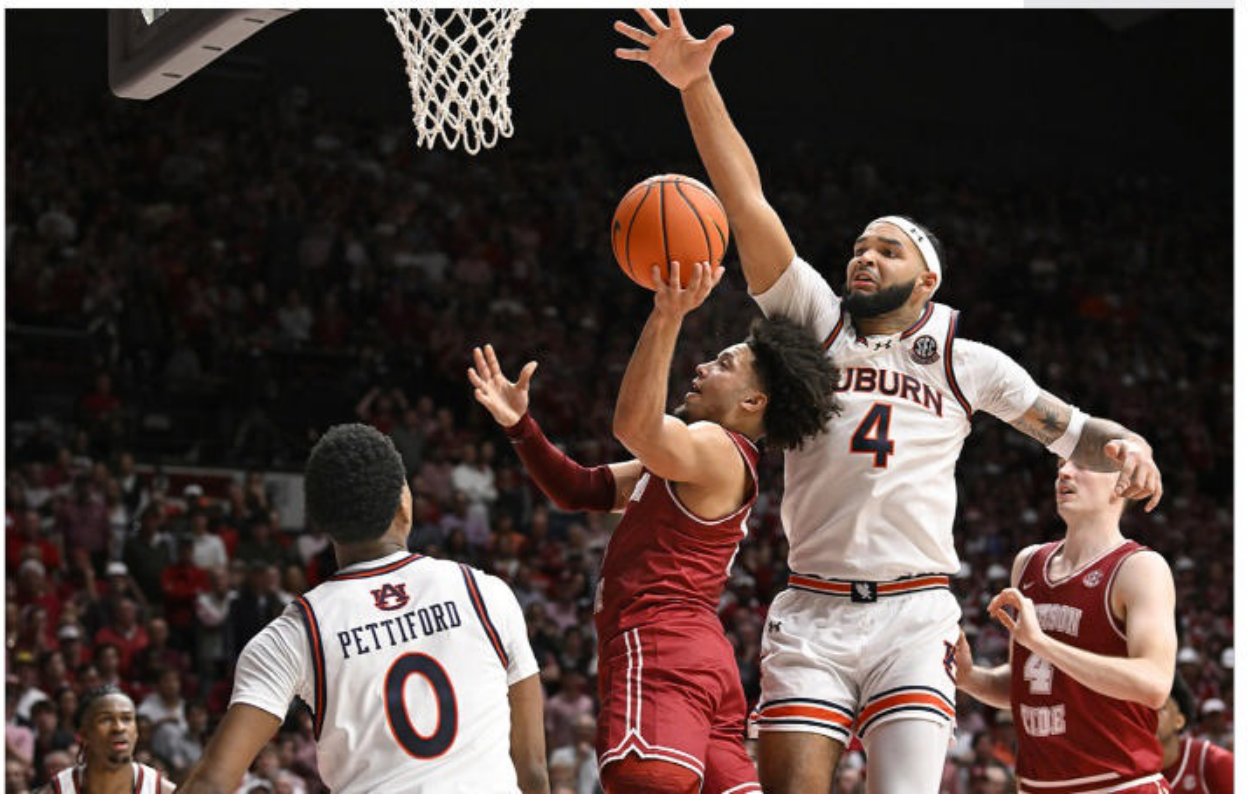
Scarbinsky recalled an Auburn-Alabama game 12 years ago: The Tigers beat the Tide 49–37, a dismal affair with a pair of coaches who'd end up fired, Tony Barbee and Anthony Grant. The teams shot a combined 4 for 28 from three-point range.

In their first meeting this year, they combined to make 17 threes and score 93 more points than that offensive nadir, roaring up and down the court and playing above the rim. "It shows how good the SEC is," Broome said after the game. "I'm going to enjoy this for a little bit but then we've got to move on."

This is the irrefutable truth. Even winning the biggest basketball game in Alabama state history offers no time for an extended exhale. Neither does losing. After the first Auburn game, Oats surveyed the remainder of his schedule and proclaimed, "We've got to bring it."

There is no choice in the SEC in 2025. Bring it, or be brought to your knees. □

"I'VE NEVER HEARD COLEMAN THIS LOUD," SAID PEARL AFTER AUBURN'S WIN IN THE IRON BOWL OF BASKETBALL.



SCORECARD: NEWSMAKERS

DOMEWARD BOUND

A COMPANY'S PLANETARIUM-BASED TECH COULD BE THE FUTURE OF WATCHING SPORTS

BY L. JON WERTHEIM

JAYLEN BROWN had thought he established position. But, then, LeBron James came thundering down the lane. Brown left his spot ever so slightly to challenge the King. The Celtics' guard and the Lakers' forward made contact. James endured it and scored.

Trying, perhaps, to sell a charging call that never came, Brown went hurtling beyond the basket, nearly ending up in the crowd. The prospect of a 6' 6", 225-pound athlete landing in their laps caused the folks in my row to flinch, some even reflexively holding up a hand to stop any contact.

Which was not necessary. We were seated 10 miles southwest of Crypto.com Arena, where the actual game was taking place.

On a Thursday night earlier this year, I joined a thousand or so jersey-wearing, beer-drinking, ref-haranguing Lakers fans at Cosm. Wedged between SoFi Stadium and the Intuit Dome in the suddenly revitalized Hollywood Park district of Inglewood, Calif., Cosm is ... well, what the hell is it? Maybe think of a three-man weave, braiding an upscale, multilevel 65,000-square-foot sports bar, with an IMAX theater and a planetarium. The name, after all, is a mash-up of *cosmos* and *coliseum*.

Cosm draws inevitable comparisons to the Sphere in Las Vegas—especially the crown jewel of Cosm, the Dome, a 500-capacity theater. There, fans pay for an assigned chair, stool or banquette and watch games on a three-story, 87-foot-diameter, 12K-resolution concave screen made of thousands of individual LED panels stitched together to create one seamless, vivid image.

Cosm CEO Jeb Terry played offensive line at North Carolina and for the Buccaneers. His mantras double as Cosm's organizing principles: *This is no run-of-the-mill sports bar* and *If you can't be at the actual game, this is the next best thing.*

That may actually be underselling the experience. An explanation of the technology becomes a relentless assault of marketing terms. It's *space age* and *immersive* and *state-of-the-art*. In a word, it is objectively *cool*.

The magic inside the Dome stems from what happens at the actual venues where the games are taking place. Partnered with every Big Four North American

COURTESY OF COSM

SCREEN TEST
Cosm's experiment is working: Tickets for the one World Series game sold out in seven minutes.

IT'S *SPACE AGE* AND *IMMERSIVE* AND *STATE-OF-THE-ART*. IN A WORD, IT IS OBJECTIVELY *COOL*.

sports league (as well as the Premier League, the English Football League, the WWE, UFC and even Cirque du Soleil), Cosm has rights to install between four and six robotic cameras in arenas and stadiums. Members of the Cosm production team—stationed in the venue, in the Dome and at corporate headquarters in nearby Playa Vista—then create a tailored broadcast that toggles between the cameras and airs on the big screen.

So, for instance, NBA games don't take the television feed from TNT or ESPN. Instead, Cosm relies heavily on its own cameras affixed to the stanchions behind the baskets. The result: a staggeringly close simulation to sitting courtside on both baselines, depending on which team has the ball.

How close does the Cosm experience mirror actual feet-on-wood experience? Sitting in my seat inside the Dome, I could literally count the beads of sweat on LeBron's neck, overhear the exhortations and rantings of both teams' coaches, and make out the lettering on the ID badge of the arena security guard positioned courtside. All while the TNT broadcast audio call of Kevin Harlan and Reggie Miller boomed on speakers.

In 2020 Cosm acquired two companies, Evans & Sutherland and Spitz Inc., both of which have been in the planetarium and domed theme park attraction business for decades. Using similar technology (and converting it to LED), Cosm set its sights on live sports and entertainment.

What the end result is, decidedly, not: cheap. My seatmate, Todd, a mortgage broker from Encino, told me he paid $55 for his ticket, which does not include food and drink. Had he returned 72 hours later for the NFL conference championship games, the same seat would have cost $555.

Hundreds of fans pay a general admission charge to gather outside the Dome or repair to the third-floor roof deck, flush with sand, beach chairs and a view of downtown L.A. and planes flying into LAX. But this reduces to just a typical sports bar experience, something akin to watching an IMAX movie on a 2-D screen while standing inside the theater lobby. You want to be inside the Dome—with an unobstructed view.

Not unlike contrasting the nosebleed sections with the suites

WREX IN EFFECT
Fans can take in a wide variety of sports at the Dome, including third-tier English soccer games.

inside a stadium, it was hard not to notice the difference between the Cosm Dome crowd and the fans on the perimeter and periphery. Yes, the demographics, but also the vibe. The more expensive the tickets, the softer the cheers and the more dudes looking down at their phones or their food.

This is not the metaverse. No one is wearing virtual reality goggles. But if a cardinal virtue of attending a sports event is the shared social experience, that could be improved upon at Cosm.

As for any sticker shock: Cosm execs encourage fans to weigh that against the cost of attending the actual game in person, much less the price of a comparable seat courtside or at the 50. And, of course, you're spared the expense of traveling to Philadelphia or Kansas City or, for that matter, Manchester. (Cosm opens before sunrise on Saturdays to broadcast English footie matches. The day before I went, actor Rob McElhenney, who famously co-owns third-tier Wrexham, hosted a Cosm watch party to help "build the club's global brand.")

At Cosm, there are no ticket surcharges. Parking is easy. Cokes run a reasonable $3. A Miller Lite is $6. The food is upscale, far less than extortionate prices at venues, and by orders of magnitude, better quality. (A pork belly bánh mì for $16 is a fair exchange.) Plus, there's no line to get into the joint. No line for the urinal. No Thunderstix. And no one inside the climate-controlled Dome is sweating, freezing or getting drenched by rain.

In addition to the Inglewood location, there is a Cosm in the Dallas suburbs. (Interestingly, neither California nor Texas permits sports gambling, which would add another dimension to the Cosm experience.) Having recently raised $250 million on a valuation of $1 billion, Cosm soon will open venues in Atlanta and Detroit, anchor tenants of development districts. There are also plans to expand to other U.S. markets that have multiple pro sports teams.

Who knows if—more tech pitch deck vernacular coming up—Cosm will scale? Who knows if this won't be this decade's Hard Rock Cafe, a theme chain that scanned cool, expanded and then fell out of vogue? Who knows if the technology won't catch up and, soon, we'll all be able to simulate Cosm-style courtside seats at home, even on our phones?

But right now, Cosm is onto something. Fans ought to be thrilled by this new option, one that resides somewhere between attending an actual game and watching one at a conventional sports bar. And leagues ought to be thrilled, too. Here's a reminder that, even if the media rights bubble bursts, there will always be new revenue streams, feeding fans' insatiable appetite for live sports. □

COURTESY OF COSM (2)

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SCORECARD: GAMEPLAN

GOLD MINE

NETFLIX'S LATEST BASKETBALL DOC SERIES DELIVERS ON SEVERAL LEVELS

BY MARK BECHTEL

ATHLETES HAVE never been more protective of their images or more in control of them. So any time a player shows up on screen, one can't help but think that whatever they're saying is, if not scripted, then at least generally planned.

That said, if Kevin Durant's talking-head segment at the end of Episode 2 of Netflix's new six-part series about the 2024 Olympic men's basketball tournament, *Court of Gold*, isn't genuine, then the big man is a pretty amazing actor.

What begins as a simple explanation of why he's interacting with random fans on social media ends with him being moved to tears as he explains that "The game has saved my life." He continues: "I come from neighborhoods where people don't even talk to each other. So much hate in the world, too."

The series follows Team USA, host nation France, upstart Canada and Serbia. The access to the players—including French phenom Victor Wembanyama—is great (and surprising, given how controlling the IOC can be when it comes to access). There's the requisite behind-the-scenes candid goofing off, such as when Joel Embiid trash-talks teammate Tyrese Haliburton of the Pacers, telling him he'd retire before he'd play in Indiana. And the on-court footage is tremendous, especially of the gold medal game between the U.S and the hosts.

After the game, U.S. stars Steph Curry and LeBron James—whose camaraderie is another infectious aspect of the series—joke about returning to the 2028 Games as coaches. Which would be great—assuming there's a sequel. □

MEDAL METTLE
Curry (4) and James (6) overcame a game-high 26 points from Wemby (top) in the final for the U.S.'s fifth straight Olympic title.

ERICK W. RASCO (2)

ADVERTISEMENT

Popular CoQ10 Pills Leave Millions Suffering

Could this newly-discovered brain fuel solve America's worsening memory crisis?

PALM BEACH, FLORIDA — Millions of Americans take the supplement known as CoQ10. It's the coenzyme that supercharges the "energy factories" in your cells known as *mitochondria*. But there's a serious flaw that's leaving millions unsatisfied.

As you age, your mitochondria break down and fail to produce energy. In a revealing study, a team of researchers showed that 95 percent of the mitochondria in a 90-year-old man were damaged, compared to almost no damage in the mitochondria of a 5-year-old.

Taking CoQ10 alone is not enough to solve this problem. Because as powerful as CoQ10 is, there's one critical thing it fails to do: it can't create new mitochondria to replace the ones you lost.

And that's bad news for Americans all over the country. The loss of cellular energy is a problem for the memory concerns people face as they get older.

"We had no way of replacing lost mitochondria until a recent discovery changed everything," says Dr. Al Sears, founder and medical director of the Sears Institute for Anti-Aging Medicine in Palm Beach, Florida. "Researchers discovered the only nutrient known to modern science that has the power to trigger the growth of new mitochondria."

Why Taking CoQ10 is Not Enough

Dr. Sears explains, "This new discovery is so powerful, it can multiply your mitochondria by 55 percent in just a few weeks. That's the equivalent of restoring decades of lost brain power."

This exciting nutrient — called PQQ *(pyrroloquinoline quinone)* — is the driving force behind a revolution in aging. When paired with CoQ10, this dynamic duo has the power to reverse the age-related memory losses you may have thought were beyond your control.

Dr. Sears pioneered a new formula — called **Ultra Accel Q** — that combines both CoQ10 and PQQ to support maximum cellular energy and the normal growth of new mitochondria. **Ultra Accel Q** is the first of its kind to address both problems and is already creating huge demand.

In fact, demand has been so overwhelming that inventories repeatedly sell out. But a closer look at **Ultra Accel Q** reveals there are good reasons why sales are booming.

Science Confirms the Many Benefits of PQQ

The medical journal *Biochemical Pharmacology* reports that PQQ is up to 5,000 times more efficient in sustaining energy production than common antioxidants. With the ability to keep every cell in your body operating at full strength, **Ultra Accel Q** delivers more than just added brain power and a faster memory.

People feel more energetic, more alert, and don't need naps in the afternoon. The boost in cellular energy generates more power to your heart, lungs, muscles, and more.

"With the PQQ in Ultra Accel, I have energy I never thought possible at my age," says Colleen R., one of Dr. Sears's patients. "I'm in my 70s but feel 40 again. I think clearly, move with real energy and sleep like a baby."

The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and Dr. Sears receives countless emails from his patients and readers. "My patients tell me they feel better than they have in years. This is ideal for people who are feeling old and run down, or for those who feel more forgetful. It surprises many that you can add healthy and productive years to your life simply by taking **Ultra Accel Q** every day."

You may have seen Dr. Sears on television or read one of his 12 best-selling books. Or you may have seen him speak at the 2016 WPBF 25 Health and Wellness Festival in South Florida, featuring Dr. Oz and special guest Suzanne Somers. Thousands of people attended Dr. Sears's lecture on anti-aging breakthroughs and waited in line for hours during his book signing at the event.

Will Ultra Accel Q Multiply Your Energy?

Ultra Accel Q is turning everything we thought we knew about youthful energy on its head. Especially for people over age 50. In less than 30 seconds every morning, you can harness the power of this breakthrough discovery to restore peak energy and your "spark for life."

So, if you've noticed less energy as you've gotten older, and you want an easy way to reclaim your youthful edge, this new opportunity will feel like blessed relief.

The secret is the "energy multiplying" molecule that activates a dormant gene in your body that declines with age, which then instructs your cells to pump out fresh energy from the inside-out. This growth of new "energy factories" in your cells is called mitochondrial biogenesis.

Instead of falling victim to that afternoon slump, you enjoy sharp-as-a-tack focus, memory, and concentration from sunup to sundown. And you get more done in a day than most do in a week. Regardless of how exhausting the world is now.

MEMORY-BUILDING SENSATION: Top doctors are now recommending new *Ultra Accel Q* because it restores decades of lost brain power without a doctor's visit.

Dr. Sears reports, "The most rewarding aspect of practicing medicine is watching my patients get the joy back in their lives. **Ultra Accel Q** sends a wake-up call to every cell in their bodies… And they actually feel young again."

And his patients agree. "I noticed a difference within a few days," says Jerry from Ft. Pierce, Florida. "My endurance has almost doubled, and I feel it mentally, too. There's a clarity and sense of well-being in my life that I've never experienced before."

How To Get Ultra Accel Q

This is the official nationwide release of **Ultra Accel Q** in the United States. And so, the company is offering a special discount supply to anyone who calls during the official launch.

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Important: Due to **Ultra Accel Q** recent media exposure, phone lines are often busy. If you call and do not immediately get through, please be patient and call back.

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SCORECARD: SOCCER

AMERICAN DREAM

CHRISTIAN PULISIC—WHO'S NO STRANGER TO CHANGE—WANTS TO ALTER THE USMNT'S FORTUNES

BY MAX MALLOW

CLAUDIO VILLA/AC MILAN/GETTY IMAGES

JUST OVER a year out from the 2026 FIFA World Cup, AC Milan's Christian Pulisic is playing the best soccer of his life. The midfielder is shining bright in Italy's topflight league, Serie A, following up a career-best 12-goal season last year with six goals in his first 21 games this season. And no player has assisted more goals in Serie A since Pulisic's transfer from Chelsea in July 2023.

"I'm very free when I'm on the pitch now, and confident," Pulisic says. "I think that's one of the best things that you can have as an attacking player."

That's even more important when one has undergone as much change in as short a period of time as Pulisic has. AC Milan is his third European club since 2019, when he left Borussia Dortmund for Chelsea.

That history of being able to cope with change has also helped Pulisic at the international level. Mauricio Pochettino—who formerly

managed Tottenham Hotspur, Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea—was hired to coach the U.S. men's national team last fall after a disappointing Copa America led to Gregg Berhalter's firing. "[Our first meeting] was great, to be honest," says Pulisic. "We had a good conversation and went into camp [in September] ... it's been great so far. It's tough with national teams. You're not with [your national team manager] every day, so I've only had a couple of weeks with him, but from the experience that I've had, [he's] a really nice guy, and it's gone well. I think he's focused on taking it step by step, improving as a team, whether it's the friendlies or the Concacaf Nations League."

MEET THE NEW BOSS
Pulisic led the U.S. with four goals in an uneven 2024, a year that saw Pochettino (left) hired.

"LIFTING THE WORLD CUP TROPHY IS EVERY KID'S DREAM," SAYS PULISIC. "TO ME, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE."

Pulisic hopes that the ease with which he's playing in Italy continues into next summer's World Cup, where the U.S. will try to improve on a round of 16 exit in 2022—and do so on its home soil. "Playing in a World Cup, there's nothing like it," Pulisic says. "The feelings beforehand are some of the most nervous I've felt. You can really feel what stage you're on."

The team Pochettino ends up taking to the tournament could include some fresh faces. A key component of his managerial style in Europe was bringing up-and-coming players through the ranks. Pochettino's first full camp, in January, was composed almost entirely of MLS players (since it was not held during an international window), and newcomers such as 24-year-old Charlotte FC forward Patrick Agyemang and Real Salt Lake's 21-year-old midfielder Diego Luna stood out.

Though Pulisic is only 26 himself, he's already amassed 76 caps since his first in 2016, so he'll be counted on for leadership. And that's fine with him. "I'm one of the older and most senior players in a very young squad now, and I think [Pochettino] puts a lot of focus on setting an example," Pulisic says. "If you do that, your teammates will follow suit. They see you do that and they want to up their level as well. He knows who I am as a person. I'm not the most outspoken guy, but [I'm] just doing the things that got me to where I am and trying to lead by example as best [I can]."

Pulisic knows there will be pressure to end the U.S.'s 20-year drought without a knockout stage win—and then some—in 2026. "Lifting the World Cup trophy is every kid's dream," he says. "It's going to take a lot for sure, but to me anything is possible. Why not shoot for the highest goal? The main focus is just to improve every day." □

JOHN DORTON/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES FOR USSF (2)

SCORECARD: NFL

GOING DOWN A ROCKY ROAD

THE EAGLES EMBRACED THEIR INNER ITALIAN STALLION EN ROUTE TO A TITLE

BY CONOR ORR
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARIO ZUCCA

SECRET SAUCE
Sirianni and his staff bonded over Italian meals, which have come to include the players. Just don't ask Fangio for his meatball recipe.

THE EAGLES won the Super Bowl because of a superior running game, along with one of the most improved defenses in the NFL.

But according to some industry experts—like my mother-in-law, Theresa Cucciniello—the Eagles also dominated for one important reason: They are more Italian than any other team in the NFL.

No offense to Tommy DeVito and the Giants, but recent (sauce-covered) breadcrumbs supporting the theory have been impossible to ignore.

On an episode of Chris Long's *Green Light* podcast in January, former Philadelphia defensive tackle Beau Allen related a story about how he once went to see center Jason Kelce in the staff locker room and was placated during his wait by a cannoli.

Vic Fangio, already famously quoted for refusing to provide his significant other with his family meatball recipe, was asked recently about cornerback Darius Slay. Fangio compared him to a "fine dago red wine." (While *dago* can be considered an offensive slur toward Italian people, it is also commonly recognized as a type of fruity red wine that is coveted by older generations of Italians.)

After having spoken to more than a dozen coaches, players and community members, though, there is far more to this Italian connection in Philly.

According to NFL data, no team has requested more Italian flags for the league's cultural heritage initiative than the Eagles (and the franchise is tied with the Patriots for the most total uniform flag patches of any country). Three of Philadelphia's staffers—head coach Nick Sirianni, newly promoted offensive coordinator Kevin Patullo and Dom DiSandro, the team's chief security officer—wear the Italian flag on their game-day visors or pullovers.

That list, however, does not include Fangio, the team's defensive coordinator, whose family arrived from Italy back in 1919 from Castiglione, a coastal town on the peninsula's northwest side. (Fangio replaced Matt Patricia, another proud Italian from the Eagles' 2023 staff, who had sported the country's flag as an assistant with the Patriots a year earlier.) Assistant special teams coordinator Joe Pannunzio, and others contribute to a vibe that redefines the word *famiglia* at the NFL level.

For those outside the building, the staff serves as a cultural bridge to an area that contains one of the densest population of Italians outside of the country itself. For those inside the building, that shared culture provides a kind of driving ethos, a deeper bond that can be drawn upon during the hardest and most isolating moments of the season.

As one former Eagles coach puts it, on plenty of occasions the Italian members of the staff have had to explain to other staffers, "We're not yelling at each other, we're just talking."

What follows is the story of the Philadelphia *Aquile* and the people they inspire.

"...YOU'RE SPEAKING to Tony."

It's a Friday night, nine days before the Eagles will compete in Super Bowl LIX, and the hostess transfers the call to the back room of Aroma on 3rd, an Italian restaurant not far from the Eagles' training complex. Tony Cardillo moved to this country back in 1974 and started working in the food service industry, owning and operating restaurants for all his adult life. It wasn't long before he befriended a hardworking bricklayer, the father of a 7-year-old named Dom DiSandro.

In a few minutes, the man most NFL fans know as "Big Dom" will swing by Aroma on his way home from work and pick up some dinner. His favorite, Tony says, is the mascarpone gnocchi with lobster (it's named after him) and, for dessert, a hot and cold, which is an espresso chocolate bar with Italian gelato on top. In the meantime, Tony tells some stories. When he brings up the names of his favorite Eagles coaches, his orchestral command of the accent brings out sounds and notes one couldn't possibly conjure from a plain English reading of their last names.

Tony's place is one of a handful of culinary refuges for Eagles personnel with Italian ancestry who might feel a little homesick and in the mood to be overstuffed like a grandson again. Dotted around the city, they are like little safe houses facilitated by DiSandro, where one can enter, the menu is swiftly removed from the table and the gracious diner is fed to the point of exhaustion. It gives a big city a more condensed feel, like that of an old, familiar neighborhood.

"I MEAN, EVERYONE AT THIS POINT THINKS THEY'RE ITALIAN ON OUR STAFF," SAYS EAGLES OC PATULLO. "IT'S FUN."

When Pannunzio showed up at the door for the first time, Tony asked, "Who sent you?"

"Dom," Pannunzio replied.

"Sit down here," Tony said.

"He comes back three minutes later and says: 'I just got off the phone with Dom.' Then he kisses me on both cheeks of mine, and we've been best friends ever since," says Pannunzio, who now brings his family to the restaurant on Christmas and Easter.

"Our culture, we're a different kind of people," says Tony. "We don't just shake hands. We hug and kiss like we're brothers and sisters. When these guys have the same culture you do, you go above and beyond in support."

If having a dimly lit, secret sanctum full of delicious, freshly made delicacies was not on brand enough, consider these other lovingly stereotypical and beautifully nostalgic touches, supplied by former and current Philly coaches:

- After Eagles victories this past season, apparently at the behest of Fangio, the team blasted "Volare" by Dean Martin on the team bus. *Volare* is the Italian word for fly—volare, Eagles volare?—and was a song that multiple coaches remember being played in their houses while growing up.
- Patullo wore a black-and-white bomber jacket—procured by DiSandro, of course—with the words ITALIAN STALLION on the back when he exited the team plane upon arrival in New Orleans for the Super Bowl. Yes, it's from *Rocky*.

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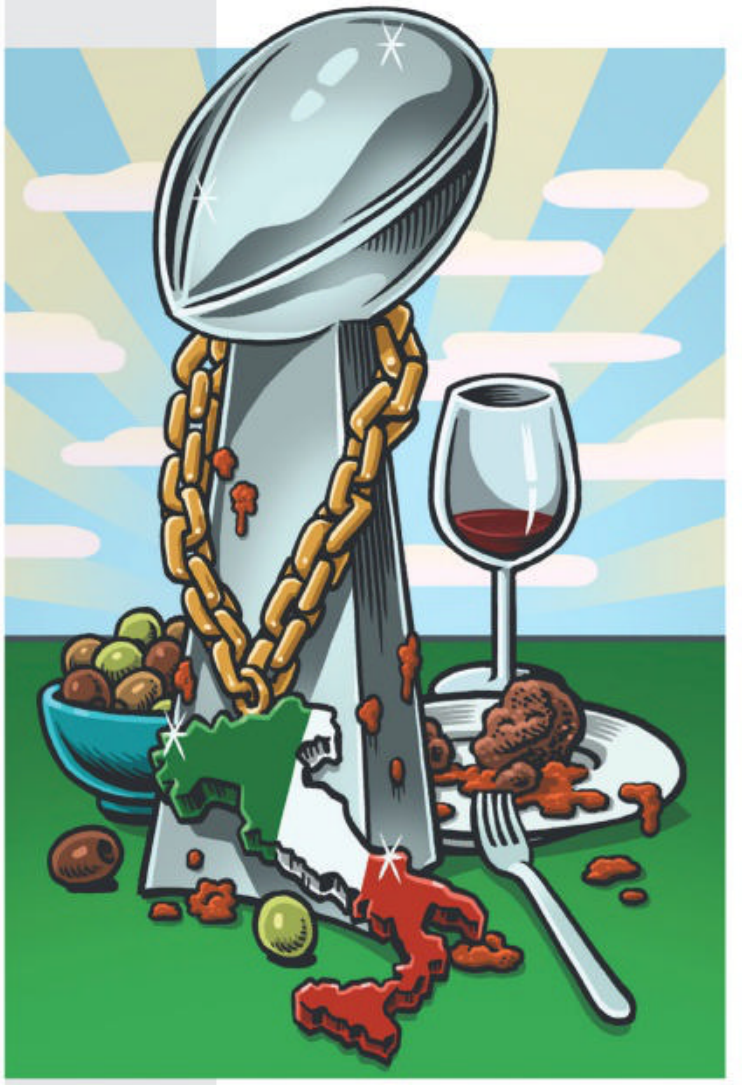

DOM-INANT DISPLAY
DiSandro, who procures both Italian grub and gear, can often be found wearing the necklace he sported at the Super Bowl.

Last year, Patullo wore a *Rocky* shirt before almost every away game underneath his warmup suit.

- Coaches have gifted each other red, white and green slipper slides, Italian horn key chains and bottles of red wine. At least one has sported a T-shirt that says WOODEN SPOON SURVIVOR.
- During the first few years of Sirianni's tenure, the entire staff ate takeout from Angelo's Pizzeria on 9th Street in South Philly on the day before games. The cash-only joint also has a tiny room in which the coaching staff can converge while a massive line swells outside (one that rookie corner Cooper DeJean was famously pictured waiting in). They take down pizza and subs stuffed with Genoa salami, cotegina, hot capicola, imported ham and mild provolone.
- Big Dom, who often sports a glimmering gold necklace with an Italian pendant, has the coaches' lockers stuffed full of an unfathomable amount of Italian food and pastries—chicken cutlet subs, ricotta cookies and cannolis—for postgame enjoyment.
- Fangio still will not share his meatball recipe, though some coaches hope the Super Bowl victory will change his mind.

Over the course of a long season, says Pannunzio, it can sometimes feel like one doesn't have a family. Love, at least from the outside, is contingent on some kind of result from a game. Bringing a piece of his culture to work chips away at the hard edges.

And because of that brotherhood, there seem to be converts. "I mean, everyone at this point thinks they're Italian on our staff," Patullo says. "It's fun."

ON SUPER BOWL SUNDAY, Nick LaGuardia went to the second floor of the Sons of Italy building in Hammonton, N.J. The upper tier, which contains a sofa and a television, is lovingly nicknamed by regulars as "the 700 level," a reference to old Veterans Stadium, the Eagles' home for 32 seasons.

Hammonton still has a massive Italian community, and LaGuardia is the past president of the fraternal Italian organization. When his beloved team hired an Italian head coach and an Italian defensive coordinator, and had DiSandro, another proud Italian, as a face of the organization, "We absolutely noticed it," LaGuardia says. "We're proud of our heritage, we're proud of our traditions and when one of us makes good on something, we all celebrate it."

LaGuardia notes some of the stories that have been relayed about Sirianni over the years. How the coach will handwrite notes to players, how he surrounds himself with his own family and includes them into the team, how he's always seen wrapping some player into a near-aggressive embrace. To LaGuardia, that's the real and tangible part of the culture seeping through. This visceral love; an Italian's unique ability to make a stranger feel as if they're a part of something. "They play for each other," LaGuardia says. "There's a lot of stars, but they play together. It starts from Nick."

Sirianni is the most successful Italian American NFL coach since Vince Lombardi. In the 56 years since Lombardi's final game, Sirianni and so many people in his orbit were molded by the stories of mothers and fathers who came before them to a region that became a beacon for Italian immigrants. Sirianni—whose family had a clothing store in Kane, Pa.—is just a few generations removed from Calabria and Sicily. Fangio's father owned a tailoring shop in Scranton. DiSandro, who grew up with Italian as his first language, says his parents are "the epitome of the American dream."

In that way, the patch means something more. More than the music, more than the food, more than the culture. It's a realization of some long-ago dream, some seemingly hard-to-fathom grasp at progress.

In the spring of 2023, Sirianni and DiSandro received an award from the National Italian American Foundation. At an event honoring them, Frank Mattei, an NIAF board member, told the pair, "You're not just being honored tonight for what you have accomplished in sports. But really, how you've achieved your success." □

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MADI MINTENKO ▸ Sport: **Swimming** ▸ Hometown: **Colorado Springs, Colo.**

Madi, a senior at Pine Creek High, broke Missy Franklin's 500-yard freestyle state record with a time of 4:39.89 in a preliminary heat at the 5A state championships. She went on to win titles in both the 200 and 500 free to become the third female swimmer to go undefeated in two individual events across four state finals (eight titles). Madi is committed to Virginia.

TOUNDE YESSOUFOU ▸ Sport: **Basketball** ▸ Hometown: **Santa Maria, Calif.**

Yessoufou, a 6' 6" small forward for St. Joseph High, had 30 points, nine rebounds and two steals in a 93–62 win over Weston Ranch, breaking the state career-scoring mark (3,462 points) that was set in 2004 by DeMarcus Nelson. The Baylor commit and McDonald's All-American moved from Benin to the U.S. before his freshman year. He averaged 28.0 points, 7.7 rebounds and 3.6 steals through 26 games this season.

DASHA VIDMANOVA ▸ Sport: **Tennis** ▸ Hometown: **Prague, Czech Republic**

Vidmanova, a senior at Georgia, defeated Texas A&M's Mary Stoiana 6-1, 7-6 in the 2025 ITA National Team Indoor Championships final, clinching the Bulldogs' seventh indoor team title. Last year she won the NCAA doubles title in May and the singles title in November. Vidmanova is the first female collegiate tennis player to take all three titles (singles, doubles and team) since 2013.

TRACK AND FIELD

Star Turn

▸ **AS HE** rounded the second curve during the 500-meter final at the Virginia Showcase, Bayside High senior Andrew Salvodon knew he needed to pump his arms and not slow down. He says he wasn't nervous, but he had reason to be: He was neck and neck with U.S. Olympic gold medalist Quincy Wilson. "I thought, *If I get to the break first, I can probably hold on to the lead*," says Andrew.

He cut to the inside lane and surged ahead. He heard the crowd, but didn't sense Quincy behind him. His body swayed near the 400-meter mark. His vision blurred as he neared the finish line, where he broke the national high school record by .76 seconds with a time of 1:00.49.

After the race, Andrew received hundreds of texts and a reaction at school unlike anything he had experienced before.

"Everyone walked out of their rooms and started clapping," says Andrew, a South Carolina commit who also won the 500-meter high school event at the Millrose Games in February. "I was shocked." □

COURTESY OF KENT NELSON (MINTENKO); COURTESY OF TOM MOTT (YESSOUFOU); TONY WALSH/UGAAA (VIDMANOVA); TAVAN SMITH (SALVODON);

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Sean Manaea, Pete Alonso, Francisco Lindor, Juan Soto, Brandon Nimmo, Edwin Díaz and Mark Vientos in Port St. Lucie, Fla.

2025 MLB PREVIEW

MEET THE METS: ENDEARING, ENTERTAINING ... AND ETERNAL

WHO BLEEDS ORANGE AND BLUE—AND WHO JUST SPENT BIG

Gambit

BY TOM VERDUCCI

*UNDERDOGS. BUT THE FRANCHISE VIBES ARE CHANGING, THANKS TO A BILLIONAIRE OWNER FOR **Juan Soto**, ONE OF THE GREATEST HITTERS THE GAME HAS EVER SEEN*

NE CLUE you are talking to the richest owner in baseball and one of the 40 richest people in the U.S. is the answer provided when you ask about the rarity of owning a Giacometti. Pieces by Alberto Giacometti account for four of the five most expensive sculptures ever sold at auction, at an average price of $106.25 million.

PASSION PLAY
Cohen (near right, with Stearns, center) pursued Soto with the same zeal he puts into building his elite art collection.

FROM LEFT: AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES; JIM RASSOL/IMAGN IMAGES

"Uh, which one?"

The story of how Steve Cohen, billionaire hedge fund trader and owner of the Mets, came to acquire a fourth Giacometti presaged the greatest acquisition in the auction environment that is baseball free agency.

It was May 11, 2015, a little before 7 p.m., smack in what photographers call the magic hour, when Cohen arrived at Christie's auction house in Rockefeller Center. The last hour of sunlight, low and soft, slathered 49th Street in gold. Cohen walked through a bronze revolving door and headed for the main salesroom, a two-story cavern that can seat a few hundred people on its floor. Major bidders such as Cohen, however, may follow a sale anonymously in private skyboxes.

Up for bid that spring night was Giacometti's *L'homme au doigt* (Pointing Man), a piece the artist created in one frenetic night in 1947. This was its first time coming to auction. According to the Christie's catalog, "Cast in bronze and standing whippet-thin at five feet ten inches, this dynamic and powerful figure is widely recognized as one of the most important sculptural achievements of the Modern era, created by the greatest master of the medium." It estimated the piece would go for "in the region of $130 million."

Cohen, who began collecting art in 2000, had purchased another Giacometti only seven months earlier at auction for $101 million. He wasn't interested this time. "I went in there not wanting to buy it," he says.

"And then I had this thought in my head," Cohen says. "It was like, *You would have the best Giacometti collection in the world*. And then I decided, *I'm gonna go for it*."

The bidding opened at $100 million. It quickly went to $105 million, then $110 million, $115 million, $120 million and $125 million. Cohen went to $126 million. The auctioneer checked with two rival bidders. There was no response.

With the auctioneer's swift banging of the gavel in his left hand, Cohen owned another Giacometti. He walked into the room with no intention of buying it and walked out having paid the highest auction price ever for a piece of sculpture: $141.3 million, including the buyer's premium.

"Sometimes," he says, "in the moment, you get a little carried away."

Almost 10 years later, and four seasons into his ownership of the Mets, Cohen entered the auction for free agent outfielder Juan Soto, this time very intent on buying. Having just turned 26 years old, Soto is one of the most reliably elite hitters in baseball history. He is the only player to have seven seasons through age 25 with an adjusted OPS of no worse than 142, a ranking that levels out factors such as ballparks and hitting environments. It means in his worst season, Soto was still 42% better than the average player. He has the highest floor in baseball.

"I look at it pretty simply," Cohen says. "There wasn't going to be another player like him on the market maybe in the next five, six, seven years. So this really was an opportunity to bring someone in at an age where you were getting him in his prime years. It's pretty rare. I mean, we already had a pretty good club. This was an opportunity to get a special player in an opportunity that may not exist for a while."

The bidding for Soto made Christie's look like a school bake sale. "It was like bidding with a bag over your head," Cohen says.

Cohen thought Soto was returning to the Yankees. But Cohen, a guy with an art collection worth more than a billion dollars, won the biggest auction of his life. He signed Soto for $765 million over 15 years. It is the most money guaranteed to an athlete and the longest contract given a baseball player.

Winning this auction was more meaningful to Cohen than winning the Giacometti, which would be on private display at his Greenwich, Conn., home. This win goes toward a public trust.

A Mets fan during his childhood in Great Neck, Long Island, Cohen wants badly not just to end the franchise's 38-season World Series championship drought, but also to end his beloved team's reputation as the Wile E. Coyote of baseball. Often entertaining but rarely successful, the Mets always seem to be one cel away from finding Acme TNT explode out of a would-be gift box.

AARON GASH/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

Soto, hitting between sluggers Francisco Lindor and Pete Alonso, adds historical greatness to a team that last year came up just two wins short of the World Series. The Mets are loaded with offense, sass and swag, young stars on the rise (infielders Mark Vientos and Ronny Mauricio), a dominant closer (Edwin Díaz) and a manager who takes every wicked turn of a New York season with the placidity and skill of a driver negotiating Le Mans (Carlos Mendoza). They also have pitching depth, but for now lack the high-ceiling, stuff-centric starters teams prefer in October.

"I said in my opening press conference, if I could turn this organization around, I could make millions of people happy," Cohen says. "That's my philosophy. I view it as somewhat philanthropic.

"I'm not trying to make money. We're trying to win. And I love the fact that I can change how the Mets are perceived, how the Mets fans perceive themselves. And if I can pull it off, wow! I've just made New York City and millions of fans happy.

"It's a civic responsibility. Listen, we have a foundation. We do a lot of philanthropic things. But I felt this was ... different."

There remains one part to the Soto signing that Cohen and his general manager, David Stearns, admit they still don't comprehend: Why did Soto choose them? Scott Boras, Soto's agent, says he had four suitors offering in the range of $700 million or more: the Mets, Yankees, Red Sox and Blue Jays. I tell Cohen I am going to ask Soto the next day why he chose the Mets.

"And I'm curious what he's going to say," Cohen says. "I mean, I'm hoping it was the conversations. We met multiple times. Was that something to do with it? Was it the perception of family and how we treat families? Maybe it was he wanted to be his own man? I mean, we can all speculate.

"And I really don't care. Because he's with us."

POWERFUL FRIENDS
Soto's lineup support includes 2024 postseason heroes Alonso (left), Lindor (below) and Vientos (bottom).

ALMOST THREE years ago, Boras took a piece of paper, wrote a number on it, tucked it into an envelope and stashed it in a desk drawer. It was the number he thought it would take one day for a team to sign Soto as a free agent. When Cohen made his first offer for Soto, Boras did not need to consult his secret number to know what to make of it.

Boras told Cohen it was the worst of the initial offers he received: "Steve, you're not even in the hunt."

"All right," Cohen harrumphed. "I'm out."

Boras says he wrote an email to Cohen the next day. It said, "Steve, my job is a couple things here. One is to represent the player. But the other thing is to give you a vision for the market so you compete in it. So, when I tell you you're noncompetitive, you should view that as good news. Because then you have the opportunity to be competitive. Otherwise, I'm going to say you should drop out."

At 7:30 that night, Cohen called Boras.

"All right. I'm open," Cohen said.

"O.K.," Boras replied. "I'm going to probably have a couple of evaluation rounds."

"Well, how many are there going to be?"

"I haven't determined that yet."

"Why?"

"Because I have to optimize the market. I have to really see if people see what we see. Because right now, they're not. I have a surplus value of $1.5 billion for this player."

Boras compared Soto to former clients Greg Maddux, Alex Rodriguez and Max Scherzer, free agent outliers with surplus value; that is, they returned more value to the teams that signed them than what they were paid. Boras's models, which assign nonlinear financial value to WAR (the per-WAR value rises as WAR increases), defined Soto as worth as much as $1.5 billion.

Cohen reconvened with Stearns. They arranged to meet Soto and his representatives, including Boras, at Cohen's home in Boca Raton, Fla., on Dec. 6. The meeting did not go well. Soto told Cohen one of his most important prerequisites was protection in the batting order. Soto never had a big bat behind him until teaming with Manny Machado on the Padres in 2022 and '23 and then Aaron Judge with the Yankees last season. Soto told Cohen the Mets did not have enough protection to suit him.

Cohen grew so frustrated by the tenor of the meeting that at one point he snapped, "Why are we even having this meeting? It sounds like you're coming up with a lot of reasons why you don't want to come to our team!"

When Soto and his team left the house, Cohen told Stearns, "He's going back to the Yankees."

"That was my gut feeling," Cohen says. "I was having a hard time coming up with a reason why he would join us."

The next morning Boras called Cohen.

"That was a really, really great meeting yesterday," the agent said.

"What?" Cohen said. "That was one of the worst meetings I've ever been in."

"Juan liked you. You definitely checked the ownership box."

"Um, ohhh-kay. Great."

At 3 p.m. the next day, Sunday, Boras's phone rang. It was Soto. "You have my direction to go final with the Mets and try to work it out," Soto told his agent.

By the end of the night, Soto and the Mets agreed on the richest contract in sports. None of the money is deferred. In net present-day value, Soto bested the previous record contract of Shohei Ohtani (deferrals bring his $700 million down to $460 million) by more than 60%. "He's a numbers genius," Boras says of Cohen. "I say different things to Steve than I would say to most owners because he's so adept at just transacting. He's also adept at dealmaking because he dealt with the art world, where your market is nobody else's market, because you want the art. Because your vision of the art has a real market in the future."

FROM TOP: JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES; KEVORK DJANSEZIAN/GETTY IMAGES

THE METS were christened with a strikeout. On May 8, 1961, in the crystal room of the Savoy Hilton, owner Joan Payson announced the expansion team that would return National League baseball to New York for the first time since the Brooklyn Dodgers left for Los Angeles in 1958 would be called the New York Mets. To commemorate the event, Payson picked up a Stan Musial bat while someone held a bottle of champagne. She took a swing at the bottle. Nothing happened. She swung again. Strike two. She swung a third time. The bottle fell to the carpet, intact. Strike three.

A waiter took his turn next. He used a bottle opener.

The Mets have won the World Series twice in their history, 1969 and 1986. Each title is mentioned in the same vein as Lourdes; each ranks among the most miraculous World Series ever witnessed. In 63 seasons, the Mets have finished in first place only six times and reached the playoffs only 11 times—never in three straight years.

"He's going to try and put a winning team out there every year," Soto says of Cohen. "I give him all my **trust.** *I hope to be happy."*

The team's spring training clubhouse is festooned with giant images of the franchise's greatest homegrown players: Tom Seaver, their only homegrown player enshrined in the Hall of Fame as a Met, and Darryl Strawberry, Ed Kranepool, Dwight Gooden, Edgardo Alfonzo, David Wright and Jerry Koosman. They epitomize what it has meant to be a Met: more endearing and entertaining than fulfilled greatness.

Further, of the 17 pitchers in history with the most strikeouts in their first 50 games, four pitched for the Mets: Gooden, Matt Harvey, Noah Syndergaard and Jacob deGrom. Each of them was a comet: spectacular to behold, until they fizzled out.

What defines Mets zeitgeist nearly as well as such charismatic players are the many famous comedians who root for the team. The roster includes John Oliver, 47; Sebastian Maniscalco, 51; Jim Breuer, 57; Ty Burrell, 57; Jimmy Kimmel, 57; Kevin James, 59; Hank Azaria, 60; Chris Rock, 60; Jon Stewart, 62; Ray Romano, 67; Bill Maher, 69; and Jerry Seinfeld, 70. Why in the name of Mr. Met, the huge-headed, ever-smiling OG of live mascots, do comedians fall for the Mets?

"Comedians are attracted to well-drawn, outsized personalities," Seinfeld says. "We don't like people that efficiently go about their business. We like people that entertain you. And hopefully go about their business as well.

"I became a Mets fan when I was just so entertained by the personalities and the color, versus the Yankees. You know, the orange and blue versus the depressing navy."

The vein of colorful Mets characters has been strong from the start, beginning with Casey Stengel as the franchise's first manager and Marv Throneberry as its first cult hero. In his 27th game with the expansion 1962 Mets after a trade from Baltimore, "Marvelous Marv" was called for obstruction while botching a rundown play at first base, was called out on appeal after missing first base on what was a triple and struck out to end the game. When Stengel came out to argue the call that Throneberry had not touched first, one of the umpires stopped him in his tracks by telling him, "Don't bother, Casey. He missed second base, too." Marvin Eugene Throneberry defined what it meant to be a Met. Literally. It was right there in his monogram.

It has been 39 years since the Mets won the World Series. Seinfeld was at Shea Stadium during the miracle against the Red Sox that was Game 6 in 1986, having taken four flights from Montana to get to his seat in the yellow upper deck.

"I still remember sitting there, the game ended, and I just couldn't leave my seat," Seinfeld says. "Game 6. I just went, what? What was that? What happened? I couldn't absorb it.

"Again, personality, you know? That was such a Mets thing. Just like 2024 was. I mean, 2024, oh my God, if you were a Mets fan in 2024, you're branded for life. That was so much fun, partly because of how unexpected it was, especially after the way the season began."

The Mets became only the third team to reach the playoffs after losing 33 of their first 55 games in a full season. They were the best team in baseball after that (67–40). They did so in their trademark comic book style: outsized and colorful, adopting Grimace as their unofficial mascot, riding the good vibes of infielder Jose Iglesias and his hit single "OMG," and turning Citi Field into the largest karaoke bar in Queens every time Lindor came to bat. The run ended two wins short of the

JEFFERY A. SALTER

World Series, a familiar not-quite-there ride for Mets fans.

Says Stearns, who like Cohen grew up rooting for the Mets, "I think we share an appreciation for the scars and triumphs that the organization has gone through—that the fan base has experienced as well. These lived baseball traumas, and yet you still firmly believe that greatness is around the corner. And now, it's partly my job to help greatness be around the corner."

A friend recently remarked to Seinfeld he was worried that the magic of 2024 could not be duplicated this year. "I said to him, 'Just be glad you have what you have,'" Seinfeld says. "'You have a game you love. You have a team you love. Don't look any deeper than that.' He was saying, 'How could '25 be anything like '24?' How could Monday be like Tuesday? That's not the way life works. You're so lucky that you have anything.

"When you get older, you appreciate baseball more and more. You realize how few things in life you really have that are companions like that. You have a well-run team. You have a team where you have confidence in the ownership, the management and the on-field management."

Seinfeld has become friendly with Cohen, the son of a dress manufacturer and a piano teacher, who took the train to Shea, bought a ticket to the upper deck and tried to finagle his way into the lower deck. "Steve Cohen immediately established himself with his wife, Alex, as having a fan-first attitude," Seinfeld says. "And that's what fans love more than anything. Our owner's a fan. I mean, it's a dream. "

★ **JUAN SOTO** wants to get one thing straight.

"The Yankees were No. 1," he says of his preference entering free agency. "From Day One."

There is another thing he wants to get straight. A rumored incident between Yankee Stadium security and his mother last season did not happen, at least not as portrayed. "Nothing happened," he says. "All this news that came out that security ... they bring my family around, that they don't let them be, and all that kind of s---. That's not true. The security in the Yankees, those guys were 1A with me and my family."

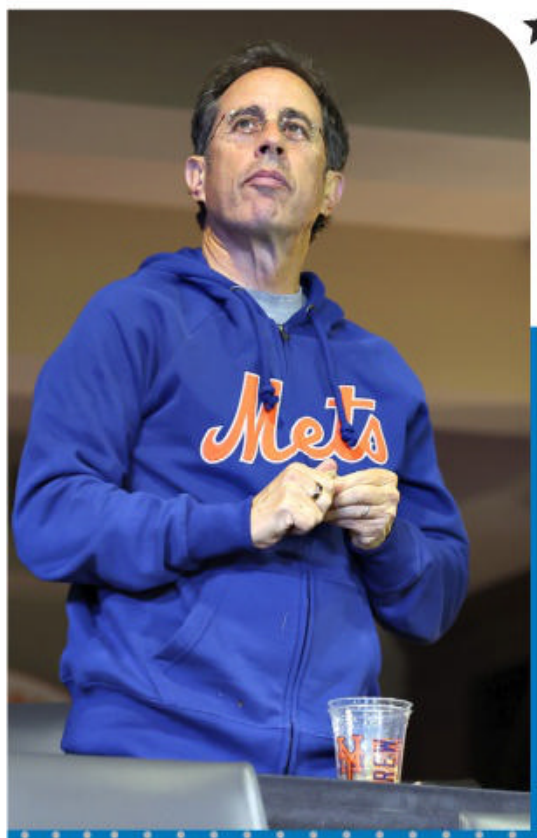
Oh, and another thing: He says he did not care that the Yankees, per club policy, did not offer him a free suite for games at Yankee Stadium. The Mets have given him a suite, up to four tickets behind home plate for regular-season and postseason games, personal security for him and his family, travel assistance for his family during the season, eight types of award bonuses, a $75 million signing bonus and an option to opt out after five years. The Mets can void that opt-out by adding $4 million a year to the remaining 10 years, which would bring the total to $805 million.

The Yankees lost their position as Soto's first choice. The Mets overtook them. How did it happen? It began when Boras arranged preliminary meetings with interested teams at a hotel in Southern California. Cohen would have none of it. He told Stearns to tell Boras he would host the meeting at his $32 million house in Beverly Hills.

Cohen, wearing his ubiquitous Mets cap, his wife, the former Alexandra Garcia, who was born in New York and is of Puerto Rican descent, and her father hosted a lunch with Latin food. They dined on a patio in a combined indoor/outdoor living space with glass panel doors thrown open wide. There was one problem: the nonstop grind of chain saws from a tree-trimming service next door.

"Geez, Steve," Boras said, "we're in Beverly Hills and you've got a tree surgeon next door?"

The parties did retreat for a bit to Cohen's home theater, where he screened for Soto a promotional video about the



KINGS OF COMEDY

The Mets' quirky zeitgeist has a strange draw on comedians like Seinfeld and can endow even the likes of Grimace with talismanic powers.

FROM LEFT: BRAD PENNER/IMAGN IMAGES; ADAM HUNGER/GETTY IMAGES

team and its player services. Since Cohen bought the team, he has invested heavily in analytics, boosting the staff of analysts from six to 35 and building a state-of-the-art performance lab at the team's Port St. Lucie training site. He plans to invest in AI to improve performance and he promises that the technology infrastructure "will be elite, because I've got high standards."

The heart of the presentation sold the Mets as a family-oriented business. Players who have played elsewhere depict the Cohens as especially attuned to the needs of family. For instance, when outfielder Jesse Winker was traded to the Mets last summer, he says "it was amazing" the way the club took care of any arrangements for his mother and daughter.

"Getting traded anywhere is hard, right?" Winker says. "In New York? In a playoff push? They made it so easy. It's so much easier to come to the field knowing your family is safe and will be taken care of and you can just go out and play. It was like the smoothest transition ever. There are other places I've been that do a really good job as well, but here it's just different."

Says Cohen, "That's the way I run my hedge fund. I don't think it takes much. If I can make their experience positive and as easy as possible so they can focus on what they're doing, I'm going to do it. I don't know what other teams do and I really don't care, but it's important to us."

"That's what fans love," says Seinfeld. "Our owner's a fan. I mean, it's a dream."

The Beverly Hills meeting lasted only 90 minutes or so. Meanwhile, Cohen asked Lindor to gather any player intelligence on Soto. How would he fit in the clubhouse? Cohen has especially close relationships with Lindor and left fielder Brandon Nimmo, both of whom are signed to long-term deals.

"I said I'd do my research," Lindor says, "but at the end of the day, he was just a guy that worked hard. And they did all their research themselves, you know? Steve is somebody that takes people's opinions. He gathers information and makes decisions based on the information that he's got. It's not just him, him, him, him. "

Meanwhile, Boras was doing his own research. One day he asked Soto, "Where is your highest career OPS?"

"I don't know."

"Citi Field."

Of the 15 parks in which Soto has played at least 15 games, Citi Field, the Mets' home, is the site of his best OPS (1.186). Boras showed him his numbers in seven other parks, including Rogers Centre in Toronto (1.005), Yankee Stadium (.979) and Fenway Park in Boston (.842). The next meeting was at Cohen's $21.6 million house in Boca Raton. "I'm running out of houses," he joked to Boras, though they had not yet convened at his $23.1 million Greenwich home.

Again, they met over an al fresco lunch. And again, they did so to the accompaniment of chain saws. Next door, renovation work was happening. Boras and Cohen had to laugh. Soto wasn't laughing. This was the meeting in which he gave Cohen reasons why the Mets did not seem a good fit, especially with a lack of lineup protection.

When asked why he appeared so pessimistic, Soto smiles and says, "We tried to not show many emotions through the meetings. We kind of kept this process neutral."

The final decision rested with what Boras calls "the Supreme Court of Soto." Who, I ask Soto, are the members?

"My mother, my father and me," he says. "My whole family is important to me. Everybody. But when it comes time to decide, that's it."

The Supreme Court of Soto chose Cohen and the Mets over Hal Steinbrenner and the Yankees. Why? It starts with Cohen. "I mean, the effort that he puts in," Soto says. "He put a lot of things out there. They put my family into it. My family, and the way they take care of everything. They have to be taken care of."

There was another separator: trust in long-term success.

"As you see how long this contract is going to be, it just came down to that decision, you know?" Soto says. "What do they have in the farm system? How many times can we be good on this team? I know the Yankees are going to be good for the next five, six years. We don't know after that."

Over the past three seasons, Cohen has spent $1.25 billion in payroll and competitive balance taxes—27% more than have the Yankees ($984.9 million). Cohen is said to be worth $21.3 billion. Six years ago, his worth was estimated to be $13.6 billion. Cohen built his fortune placing high-volume bets on small movements in stock prices. His previous company, SAC Capital Advisors, pleaded guilty to insider trading charges in November 2013. Cohen was never charged or sanctioned in the case. He opened a new firm, Point72, the following year.

The Mets' infrastructure (minor league player development, technology, systems, etc.) is still in start-up phase. Until it matures, Cohen's personal wealth is the organizational backstop. As he said in a meeting with reporters, "I've always wanted to be more measured in payroll growth. And [until] we

get there, I have the ability to spend if I have to."

Soto is trusting that Cohen will spend what it takes to put a competitive team on the field for the next 15 years. "That's what he told me," Soto says. "He's going to try to put a winning team out there every year. And he's capable of it. And I give him all my trust. I hope to be happy."

The Yankees, Soto says, simply did not fill him with confidence. "I mean, they made a pretty good effort," he says. "But we went back and forth with a lot of things. We tried our best. But, I don't know, I just feel like ... it's just weird. It's kind of like ... how can I explain it?"

He stops. He looks toward the ceiling. He is quiet for 10 seconds. It seems an eternity, more time than he has in the batter's box to get ready for the next pitch.

Finally, Soto says, "I feel like the Yankees did a pretty good job. But they kept ... they couldn't get it done right. Like, I wanted to get it done, but they're still bouncing around. 'Here ... at least that ... maybe ... maybe no ... ' instead of just getting it done right away. Yeah, just get it done."

It was an amazing accomplishment by Cohen. It was very far from his goal, which is to build the Mets into something they have never been: a sustainable winner. But it was his greatest leap toward it. He convinced the most valuable free agent in the history of sports that his next 15 years are best spent with the Mets—the Mets of Stengel, Throneberry, Doc, Darryl, the Dark Knight, the eighth longest championship drought in MLB and, despite last year's success, attendance that ranked behind 17 other teams.

"I think there's always been a little bit of skepticism with believing that the Mets are going to be sustainable winners," Cohen says. "I think Mets fans have had this negative perception. One of my goals is to break that negativity. I want that postseason feeling again for me. I want it for the team.

"I mean, that month was one of the most ... I had not felt anything like that. I don't know if I ever felt anything of that type of emotion."

F YOU had to pick one at bat that explains why Juan Soto is one of the greatest young hitters in baseball history, the choice is easy: his 10th-inning, pennant-winning home run in ALCS Game 5 last fall against Guardians pitcher Hunter Gaddis. It certainly made an impression on the man who this offseason gave him $765 million, Mets owner Steve Cohen.

"I always tell people, go watch the at bat against the Cleveland pitcher," says Cohen. "How many players have you seen with that type of confidence in what he was about to do? Through the entirety of sport, not just baseball.

"It was like he knew, and I think the pitcher knew, what the end outcome was going to be."

Soto sat with me to watch the at bat and provide his observations and thoughts as it unfolded. The first-person account is even more fascinating than watching as it unfolded in real time.

THE SITUATION: Runners at first and second, two outs, top of the 10th inning. The game is tied 2–2. The Yankees lead the series three games to one. Aaron Judge is on deck.

PITCH NO. 1 (0–0 COUNT): Slider. It misses inside for a ball. Soto stares at Gaddis while giving him a Soto Shuffle.

SOTO: *My mindset was "Get Judge in the inning." That's why I took that pitch. I was like, "O.K., I'm winning now. Just keep looking for a good pitch. Just drive it to the middle. Don't try to hit a homer."*

PITCH 2 (1–0): Slider. It clips the bottom of the zone for a called strike. Soto buckles his knees in surprise at the call.

SOTO: *That was a perfect pitch. I thought it was a ball. Just wipe it and keep trying the same thing. Short, line drive to the middle.*

PITCH 3 (1–1): Slider. It's at the top of the zone. Soto fouls it back.

SOTO: *I swung hard. And then I actually told myself like, "Hey, now you've got to calm down a little bit more."*

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: Is that why you are nodding here at Gaddis and staring at him? To remind yourself?

SOTO: *Yeah ... O.K., definitely, I play mind games. So, it's "I know you." That's part of it.*

PITCH 4 (1–2): Changeup. Inside. Soto fouls it to the left side with a late, quick swing. He nods repeatedly as he adjusts his batting gloves.

SI: That's a great swing.

SOTO: *That was the best pitch he threw me, and it was nasty. When I fouled off that ball, I was like, "It's over.*

As for Boras's number in the envelope, he will not reveal it exactly, but he does say, "We're very close to it. [The final number] was a little bit above what I had."

And as for the most expensive piece of sculpture ever won at auction, apparently, unlike pitching, you can have too many Giacomettis. Pointing Man was shown the door. "It turned out that it wasn't something I really wanted," Cohen says. "I ended up selling it a few years later. Uh, that sometimes happens."

As for Mets zeitgeist, this season, more than most, is full of promise.

"I am either at the game or watching the game every single day and it's gonna be phenomenal," Seinfeld says. He thinks of Soto in blue and orange in the deep lineup Soto wanted. "That guy surrounded in that lineup is a thing of beauty and I just can't wait to watch it," he says.

One day in February, Seinfeld was riding in a car with his good friend Larry David, who is a Yankees fan.

"I don't understand your life as a Yankee fan," Seinfeld told him.

"What?"

"I don't understand how you live. That if you don't win the World Series, you fail. And if you do win the World Series, that meets your expectation. That's it."

He let the thought hang for a beat.

"What kind of life is that! What kind of life is that!"

The line made David laugh.

A Mets fan knows not satiation. For now, Cohen has bought them a team that resembles a Lichtenstein print: bold, bright, fun, loud, expensive. It is something to dream on. The dream is that this time, there really is greatness around the corner. □

A MASHER'S MINDSET

It's over." There's no more chances. If I foul it off, that one, you're done. That's the best you got, and I get to it.

PITCH 5 (1–2): Changeup. Away. Soto fouls it weakly on the ground to the right side.

SOTO: *I came around it, but still, I was like, "Even better." Because now I'm seeing it more ... I was telling myself, "You're all over him. Like, he has no chance with anything. Just don't try to be too big. Just try to do the same thing. Low line drive to the middle, try to drive that run in from second base."*

PITCH 6 (1–2): Slider. It's on the outside corner. Soto slices it foul to the left side with a short, late swing.

SI: That was a perfect swing.

SOTO: *He had no chance. You threw me another perfect pitch. I stay inside of it. If you throw it again, I might go over the third baseman and there's a double. ... He already showed me the slider. He already showed me the changeup. I fouled off all of them. What else does he have?*

SI: Heater?

Soto smiles devilishly.

SI: Oh, come on, you can't be looking for it, though.

SOTO: *Yeah. One hundred percent.*

PITCH 7 (1–2): Fastball. Slightly above the top of the zone, nearly directly to catcher Bo Naylor's target. Soto crushes it for a three-run homer.

Soto watches himself running around the bases.

SI: Pretty good feeling, huh?

SOTO: *Probably the best moment of my career so far. No doubt. That's what happens when you have [lineup] protection. That's why we need protection.*

SI: You think that's a good example of what it means to have good protection?

SOTO: *Yeah, because he never tried to walk me or go around me. He was attacking me.*

At the end of the day, you get a hit, or you make yourself out, so I prefer that than being between walked or getting an out. —T.V.

NEW YORK YANKEES/GETTY IMAGES

BY Stephanie Apstein

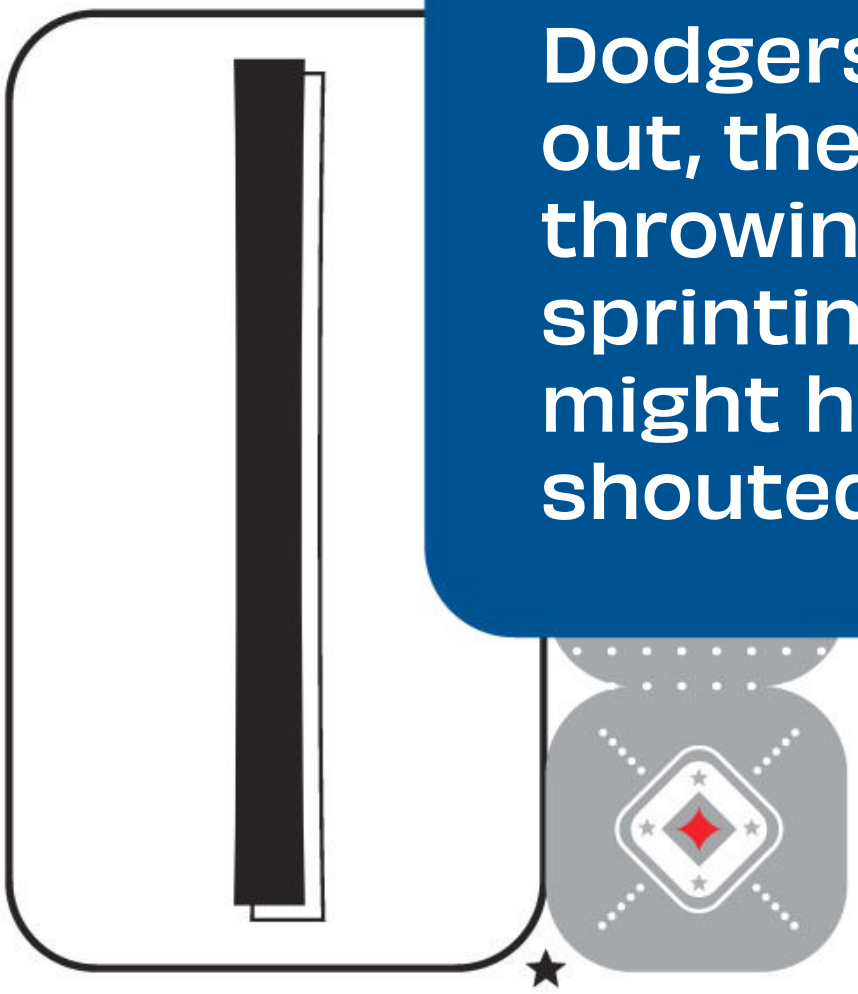
Overcoming the DODGER Blues

*HE LOVES HIS JOB AND IS HISTORICALLY GOOD AT IT. SO WHY DOESN'T L.A. LOVE **Dave Roberts** BACK?*

PHOTOGRAPH BY KOHJIRO KINNO

2025 MLB PREVIEW
2025 MLB PREVIEW

IN THE ENSUING months, the details have blurred. As the Dodgers recorded the final out, their manager remembers throwing up his arms and sprinting toward the field. He might have cried. He probably shouted. He definitely beamed.



You might have thought Dave Roberts had just won the World Series.

When he actually *did*, two weeks later—his second in five years—his reaction was similar. By then, he had put the finishing touches on a masterful postseason and all but posed for his plaque at Cooperstown. But in order to do all that, Los Angeles had to win the NLDS, three games to two, over the Padres, and when they did, Roberts felt relief—not just that his team would keep playing but that he would be there while they did.

On a warm day in January, Roberts, 52, leans forward in the dining room of his sprawling San Diego home and addresses the fear he tried not to let consume him that week. The Dodgers had won two pennants and a World Series since he arrived in Los Angeles before the 2016 season. But dating to a 2022 NLDS defeat to the Padres (after winning 111 regular-season games), they had lost six straight postseason games, all to less talented division rivals, all in games that Roberts later admitted the opponents had just wanted more. Now they had spent $1.2 billion in a single offseason to assemble perhaps the greatest collection of talent ever to jog onto a baseball field—and they were on the verge of crashing out of the Division Series yet again.

“I did feel that—right or wrong, truth or not truth, I don’t

FROM TOP: DANIEL SHIREY/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES

FEELING IT
Boone (top, right) can relate to the plight of Roberts, who celebrated after defeating the Mets (bottom) before beating his pal's Yankees for a second title.

know that answer—but I felt my job was on the line if we didn't win that series," Roberts says. "That's just my truth."

He largely kept his worries to himself. Even bench coach Danny Lehmann says he did not know. Chris Woodward—then a senior adviser and now the team's first base coach—had an idea, he says, mostly because he himself lost a managerial job when the Rangers moved on from him in 2022 after three and a half years in charge. "I knew," Woodward says. "I know what that feels like." But Roberts never said anything aloud.

Looking back on 2024, he says he feels good about the way he handled the most challenging season of his career: nearly unprecedented expectations coupled with nearly unprecedented injuries. Twenty-seven Dodgers combined to spend 2,361 days on the injured list, 38% more than league average and 19% more than the team with the next-highest total, the Red Sox. In September alone, L.A. was without eight different starting pitchers. In the middle of that month, Roberts called a rare team meeting and delivered a fiery speech, one that players still point to as the moment things turned. All that roster churn left him navigating four planned bullpen games in the playoffs. And he kept his focus on the team, not on his job security. "I am proud of the fact that I didn't let that angst [affect] how I managed and let the players feel that," Roberts says.

He has had plenty of practice trying to ignore criticism. He still flashes back occasionally to two times he heard boos from home fans in the World Series: in 2018, when he removed Rich Hill with one out in the seventh inning of Game 4, up 4–0, and in '20, when he pulled Clayton Kershaw with two outs in the sixth inning of Game 5, up 4–2. (The Dodgers blew the lead to the Red Sox in '18 but held it in '20 against the Rays.) In both cases, Roberts says, fans were operating with incomplete information. He was actually just going to deliver Hill a pep talk, but the starter misunderstood and handed his manager the ball, no longer in the right frame of mind to pitch; Kershaw and Roberts had agreed before the start of the inning that the pitcher would face only two more batters.

Roberts's explanations have not quieted the gripes on social media and sports talk radio. Neither did the 2020 title, L.A.'s first in 32 years. At times it has been fair to wonder if his detractors include members of his own front office. Roberts did not merit a spot on the podium at Shohei Ohtani's introductory press conference last offseason. He was also not listed in Ohtani's contract as a "key man." If either owner Mark Walter or president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman departs, the deal would be voided. And Roberts opened spring training as a lame duck, with one year remaining on his contract. Team president Stan Kasten declines even to discuss Roberts.

"It's just too awkward a time," he says, adding, "Maybe at a later date."

Roberts hopes that the 2024 title will change everything. Over and over, his players use the word *vindication* to describe what they felt on his behalf when they raised the trophy. His career .627 winning percentage is the best ever among those who have managed 1,000 games. His teams have won 100 games in five of his eight full seasons, and never fewer than 91. And he has now won more World Series titles than nine of the 23 skippers in the Hall of Fame. "I really wanted this one in the worst way," Roberts says. "I think when I look back, I didn't appreciate how much I wanted to shut the haters up, I guess."

It may take him even longer to appreciate that he didn't shut them up at all.

EARLY IN Roberts's managerial career, he developed a reputation as a bit of a phony, in part because he always appears to be having fun in a job that does not always seem to be very much fun. He answers questions about decisions he did not make. He takes the blame for organizational processes. He drags himself out there every day and lets people scream at him. By the Dodgers' media relations department's count, Roberts addressed the press 537 times in 2024. (By my count, Walter spoke twice.)

And yet Roberts tries to shake hands with every player every day. He remembers reporters' names—and thanks *them* for *their* time. When the national anthem plays, he whispers to his coaches, "This is the best part of the day."

Eventually the people around Roberts came to understand that his optimism is self-fulfilling. "It's nuts," he acknowledges. "But I believe that we have the best culture, and players want to play for me."

Entering his 10th year in Los Angeles, Roberts has gained confidence in his voice. In that fateful meeting last fall, he called upon the players to stop feeling sorry for themselves after yet another injury hit the club. He reminded them of the three former MVPs—right fielder Mookie Betts, first baseman Freddie Freeman and two-way star Shohei Ohtani—and nine All-Stars still on the roster. "We're still the Dodgers," he told them. "We still have a lot of great players." He challenged them to act like it. They went 11–3 to close the regular season and then 11–5 in October.

At times, Roberts has become less gentle in the way he delivers information, which his players appreciate. No team offers less playing time for more talent than the Dodgers, which means no manager has more hard conversations than Roberts. At first he tried to soften the blow. "He's a very likable guy, and sometimes when you have a tough conversation, people can stop liking you, and maybe he didn't want to affect relationships early on," says utility man Kiké Hernández. "He got to the point where he realized we're all grown men."

Now Roberts just tells them the plan. "We're the Dodgers," says Woodward. "We consider ourselves the best organization in baseball. To play on this team, you need to be one of the best—if not the best—or you do your part." Often that means sitting based on platoon matchups. "[Roberts is] up-front with me about it, and I know what the situation is," says third baseman Max Muncy, who has started only 55.4% of games against lefties since his 2018 call-up. "Doesn't mean I have to like it, but I understand it. And because he's not beating around the bush, it's easier to take."

It helps that the players know he cares about them as people. In May, when reliever Yohan Ramírez hit two straight Reds players, Roberts trotted to the mound not to give him the hook but to give him a hug. The afternoon of righty Ben Casparius's debut, the pitcher admitted he'd idolized Roberts as a childhood Red Sox fan. Two months later, Roberts referenced the conversation with Casparius's father, Phil. And Freeman chokes up as he calls Roberts "more than a manager": When Freeman's son Max, then 3, battled the neurological disorder Guillain-Barré syndrome last season, he says Roberts seemed to know implicitly when to reach out and when to give him space.

Freeman adds, "There's a reason why so many people will play injured and hurt for him and this organization. He's the leader of this team, and there's a reason Sho, [shortstop

STEALING BOSTON'S HEART
Roberts, who played just 45 games for the team, remains a Sox legend thanks to his ninth-inning swipe of second in the 2004 ALCS.

CHUCK SOLOMON

Miguel Rojas] and I—all of us who were hanging on by a thread last year— will do anything for that man."

Muncy says, "There should never be anybody that's wearing a No. 30 Dodgers jersey ever again. I never want to play for another manager."

The way Roberts describes his role, it's hard to imagine why anyone else would want the job. "The manager is essentially the CEO," he says. "You've got global, domestic sponsorships, corporate sponsors, you've got owners, you've got TV, you've got media, you've got fans, then you've got the baseball side, right? And so you're dealing with all of it, and you have to understand that everything you do or say is a reflection of this huge engine, and that's a big undertaking. And it's something that I really value. I feel a big responsibility, and I love it, but I always have to keep that front of mind."

That's all even more true now that the Dodgers have all but captured the Japanese market, after signing Ohtani and righties Yoshinobu Yamamoto and Roki Sasaki in the last two offseasons. The World Series had better TV ratings in Japan than in the U.S. Almost no one else in baseball can relate to the scrutiny Roberts faces.

*Woodward says the team began to resemble its leader during the NLDS: "**The grit,** the grind. I played against him. He was a grinder at heart."*

"Aaron [Boone] is the only person," Roberts says of the Yankees' manager. "There's other [high-payroll] teams that I don't need to name that go up and down. The Yankees have to win. And when Aaron wins 100 games and they don't win the World Series, his job is being called for in the same way."

Boone attended USC, Roberts UCLA; they played against each other in the majors in the aughts; they share a handful of close local friends. Both carved out good playing careers for themselves but are remembered mostly for one spectacular playoff moment: Boone's walk-off homer against Boston in the 2003 ALCS and Roberts's steal of second in Game 4 of the 2004 ALCS against the Yankees. Now they helm the two most historic franchises in the sport. They have compared notes over dinners, in ballpark hallways, while walking 18 holes. "In a lot of ways," Boone says, "We're looking in the mirror at each other."

And both have come to understand that they are not entirely in control of their legacies.

"So much of the narrative is an outcome-based one," says Friedman. "If someone would have gotten a big hit, then [Roberts] would have managed great. There's just so much more nuance in it than I think is factored into the public narrative. And so I feel like he's unfairly worn a lot of the different things that have happened in different Octobers."

If the manager is the CEO, then any fan who's ever donned a Dodgers cap is on the board of directors.

IT'S A beautiful day at Camelback Ranch in Arizona, and the hundreds of fans lining the pathways trodden by their heroes are delighted when Roberts speeds by in his golf cart, headed for the back fields. "Dave!" they scream, along with a cacophony of encouragement. He slows down and beams.

He is wise to enjoy the adulation while it lasts. It will fade the minute he pulls a cruising starter or uses a lineup fans dislike. "I hate even [talking about the haters], because you're giving them too much power," Roberts says. "But you feel it and you hear it, and you do the best you can, but people are always going to have their opinions, right? There's people that still feel that I shouldn't manage this club."

He has given some thought to why. Some people believe he is too wedded to the numbers, he says. "I can make a decision 100% on my eyes and my gut, and there are people that say, 'What are you doing making an analytical decision?'" he says. "That narrative, it just hasn't stopped."

But he fears the disconnect runs deeper. It's not just that fans don't connect with his choices. They often don't connect with him personally.

"I'm certainly very stoic in my job," he says. "I want it to reflect a six- or seven-billion-dollar machine in the Dodgers, and I'm trying to represent the brand in a way that is very classic. I can't be Tommy Lasorda. I don't want to be Tommy Lasorda in the sense that you're going up and down, riding the wave, because I feel that the consistency of my demeanor means a lot. [Fans] want me to freak out with them."

He laughs. “I am freaking out!” he says. “But I’m freaking out inside. They want me to curse and get thrown out 10 times and get on social media and call out the players.” (Those fans might be encouraged if they read his comments a little more closely. During the postseason alone, Roberts openly speculated that Betts was letting “the pressure of past performances … kind of bleed in” and lamented that Ohtani’s “chasing hasn’t been good.” That said, he’s been thrown out of 12 games in nine years; Boone has been tossed 39 times in seven.)

Roberts continues, “I think that if you are ownership, you’re [Andrew Friedman], and you see a manager who is moving with the weather like a flag in the wind, you can’t depend on him. And so my job is to be a stalwart in the organization. And so as we’ve gone through ups and downs of a season, I think it’s very important to be consistent, and that’s what I try to do. And fans just don’t like that.”

Their opinion is not likely to change just because Roberts managed the 2024 postseason beautifully. It certainly didn’t after he did so in ’20. That came as a surprise to him.

“I did think it was going to change after we won the World Series,” he says. But the Dodgers went 13–2 to open the 2021 season; two weeks later, the *Los Angeles Times* printed four letters to the editor calling for his head. And outside Los Angeles, he realized, people discounted that ’20 title because it came in the COVID-shortened 60-game season. “I would still to my grave say it was harder,” he says, but it grated on him that so many fans disagreed. Between that and the fact that the city was still locked down in the aftermath and never celebrated fully, that championship did not quite bring him the approval he sought.

But he has it now. The criticism has annoyed him, but it has also motivated him. So what will he use now?

He does not pause to think. He tried to repurpose the asterisk some fans assigned the 2020 title by encouraging his players to focus on earning a parade, which L.A. did not get amid COVID. “That’s the way I spun that narrative,” he says. “Going forward, I think the dynasty, the legacy is gonna have to be our mantra; we’re trying to do something that no one has done since the [mid-1990s].”

Sure, but even that is an organizational answer. What about for Dave Roberts?

Now he *does* take a breath. “My job is essentially to try to protect them from any outside noise or pressure and let them focus on their job,” he says. Trying to validate or prove people wrong is just adding to pressure, so just kind of letting our guys just focus on the job at hand [is important].”

Besides, “After two championships in [five] years, it’s just—I don’t—it’s not going to bother me,” he says with a smile.

The trick will not be proving people wrong. It will be accepting that he has—and it doesn’t matter.

★ **NOW, YOU** may think that you too could manage a roster of that talent to a championship. But could you shuffle through 40 different pitchers over six months, second only to the Marlins, who lost 100 games? Could you find the intestinal fortitude to collaborate with your staff to punt a World Series game to give yourself a more favorable matchup in the next

KOHJIRO KINNO (2)

“I’m certainly very stoic in my job,” Roberts says. “Fans want me to freak out with them. I am freaking out! But I’m freaking out inside.”

★ ★ ★

★

PAR FOR THE COURSE
At camp, Roberts remained, as is his wont, even-keeled as he patrolled the grounds and watched Yamamoto (18) throw.

one, knowing that if your bet fails, you alone will face the criticism? Could you do it all while your every grimace is dissected in three languages, while you navigate 26 egos, while you wonder where you will live next year?

"I love it," Roberts says. "I freaking love baseball. I love coaching players. I love the Dodgers."

Friedman bristles at the question of whether it was fair for Roberts to worry about his job in October.

"Is it fair for him to feel that way?" Friedman says. "I don't know. Ask him. You can't ask me if it's fair for him to feel a certain way. [Were we] going to [fire him]? No, it wasn't even a consideration. That's all I can answer." He adds, "I feel like one competitive advantage that we've had is our organizational continuity. We make mistakes, but it allows us to learn from them and grow from evil and keep iterating."

Roberts has learned that he can ask nearly as much of his players as he does of himself. After Game 4 of the NLDS, Woodward told Roberts that the team was starting to resemble its leader. "The grit, the grind," Woodward says. "I played against him. He was a grinder at heart. He loved the game. I told him, 'We're getting pushed a little bit, and I think this group can handle it. If this team takes on who you are, we'll get through.' And we did."

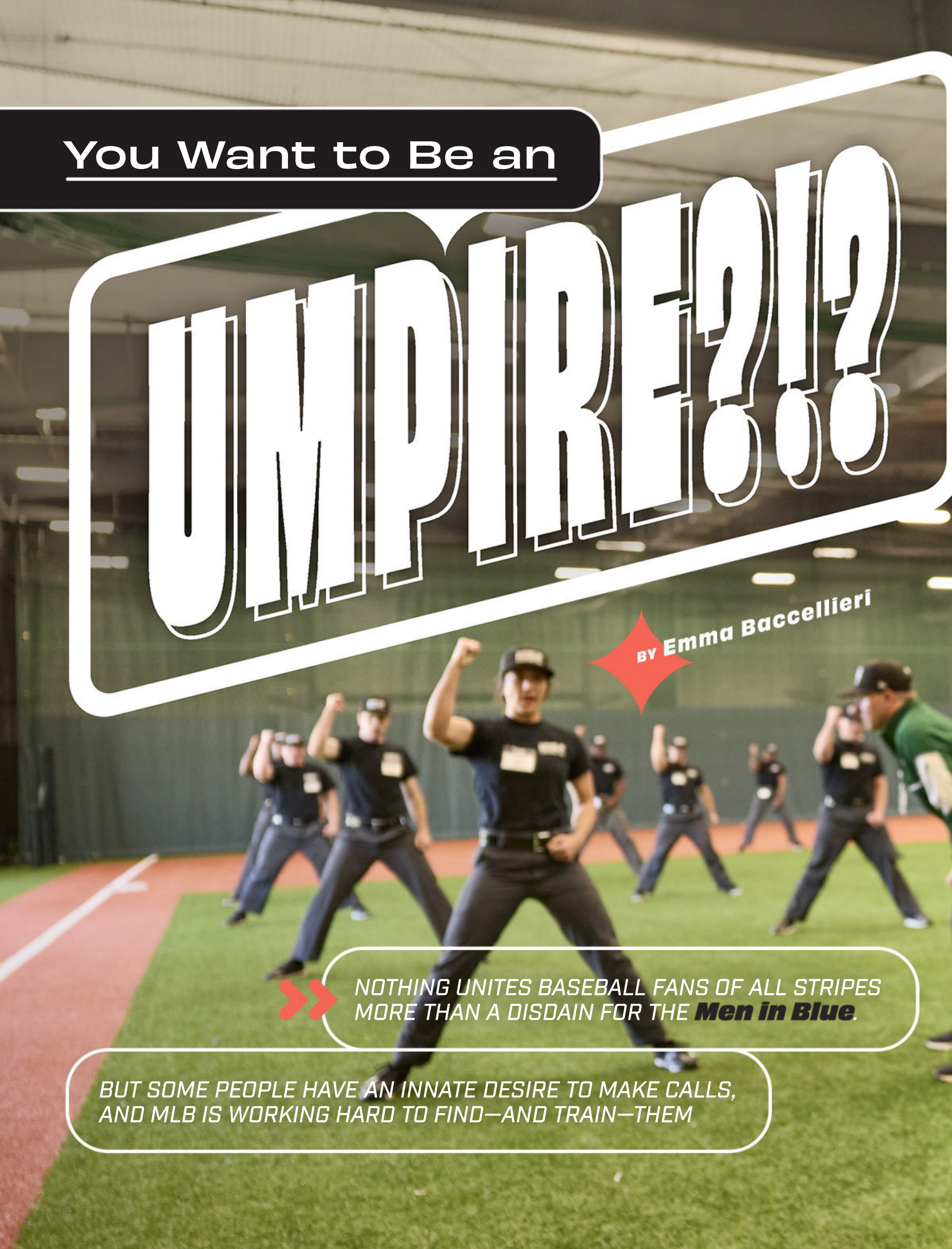
It was the hardest season of Roberts's career. "And the thing is," says Lehmann, "The next one's gonna be harder."

A dozen yards away, Roberts watches extra infield drills for a while and then strides toward the throngs of fans lining the pathway toward the facility. The crowd clamors for him, and he spends nearly 10 minutes signing autographs and smiling as they tell him how much 2024 meant to them. Eventually he waves and heads inside to focus on 2025. The cheers recede. □

You Want to Be an

UMPIRE?!?

BY Emma Baccellieri



NOTHING UNITES BASEBALL FANS OF ALL STRIPES MORE THAN A DISDAIN FOR THE **Men in Blue**.

BUT SOME PEOPLE HAVE AN INNATE DESIRE TO MAKE CALLS, AND MLB IS WORKING HARD TO FIND—AND TRAIN—THEM

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JEFFERY A. SALTER**

BASEBALL IS FULL of situations. What gets tricky is when those situations become incidents.

This is the language of umpires. A *situation* is a flash of irritation, a simmering temper, a plea for reconsideration. (Think of throwing a helmet.) An *incident* is a fight, an ejection, a rules violation. (Think of throwing a punch.) Yet there can be surprisingly little space between them. A brief moment of venting under one umpire can become a total explosion under another. Which is why *situation management* has its own dedicated section of the curriculum at MLB Umpire Prospect Development Camp.

Or, put more simply, daily case studies in handling a screaming manager.

This comes right before lunch, after the prospects have spent the morning studying the rule book in the classroom, before they will spend the afternoon making calls in simulations on the field. It's a delight for the instructors, all current or former umpires, now role-playing as frustrated skippers and putting some other poor sap on the business end of outbursts they've endured. And it's a crucial learning opportunity for the prospective umps.

It's essential to pay attention to detail. Was the manager sprinting out of the dugout or simply walking? Keep the discussion focused on the specific play at hand. (Don't let it become about how the zone has been called all day. That never leads anywhere.) Know the difference between general

HAPPY CAMPERS
Candidates, who have varying backgrounds and levels of experience, are put through the paces in the classroom as well as on the field at MLB's academy in Vero Beach.

criticism of the call and personal criticism of the umpire. Make sure everyone knows that a warning is a real *warning*. Never get caught two-on-one: If a base umpire sees his partner behind the plate getting an earful from the hitter *and* his manager, they should come down, get in between and peel one of them off. (To borrow language from another sport here: This is "setting a pick.") Understand when a manager is legitimately asking for information. Just as important: Understand when a manager is putting on a show for his players. And call everyone by their first names.

But even with a perfectly smooth touch, inevitably there will be some of those situations that escalate to incidents. And when they do, the umpire needs to scribble down some notes on the lineup card, because every incident requires a written report.

As put by one camp instructor now umpiring in Triple A: "It's a lot more than just showing up to the ballpark and making people mad."

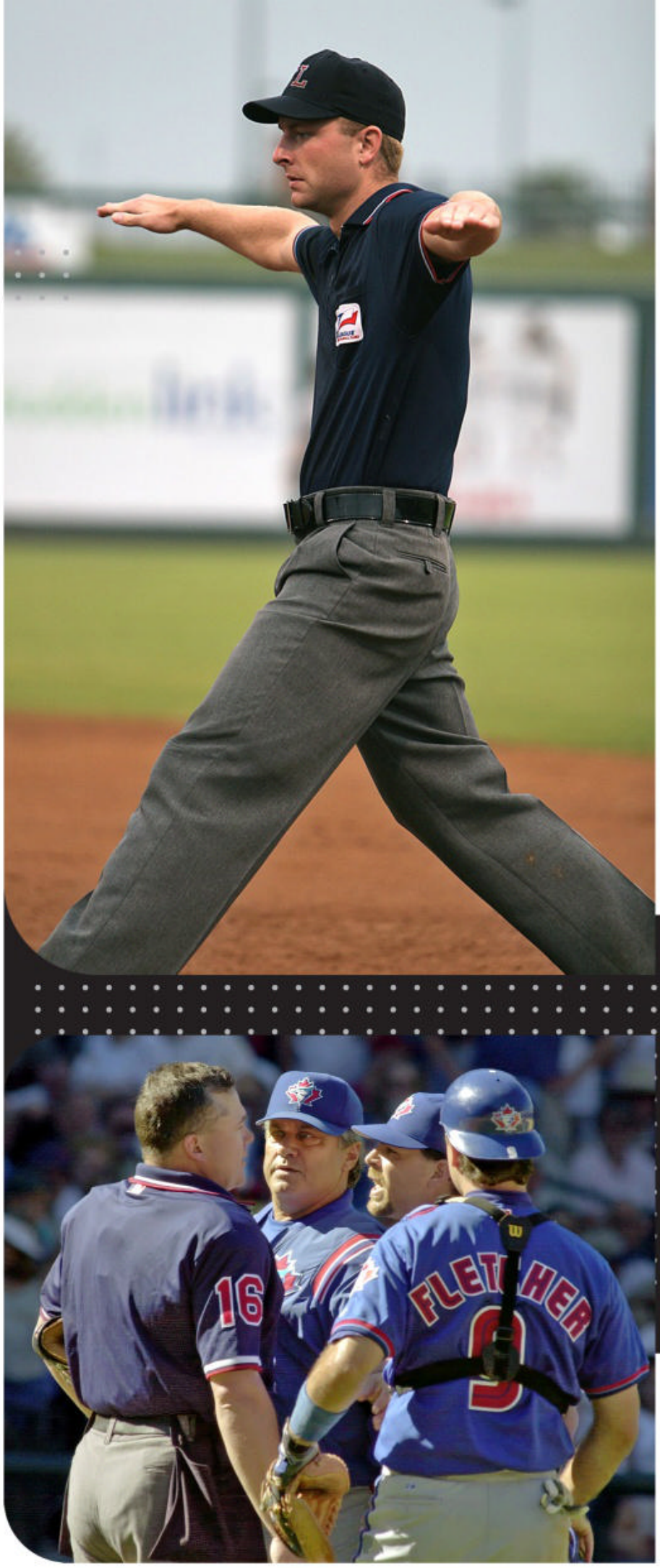
But it's easy to see where people get the idea. This has been the primary cultural understanding of the umpire for more than a century. It's perhaps the most unifying experience in baseball: No matter the level of play or the rooting interest, everyone hates the umpire. The job has always been rather thankless. Yet it's perhaps never been more so. MLB umpires are better at their jobs than ever. (Really!) Their performance has never been more easily and ruthlessly dissected.

That comes in slow-motion replays and with video reviews and on social media recaps, such as Umpire Scorecards, which has 373,900 followers. (Forget the strike zone shown on a television broadcast: Umpires would like to reiterate that approximation is not the real zone.) It's easier than ever to determine just how much and how often an umpire has erred. The umpire's judgment used to be indisputable. Now, the process of disputing it has been codified in the rule book, with replay challenges a regular part of the game.

And there are potentially more disruptive changes on the horizon. It's little surprise that "MLB umpire" is one job the American public seems particularly eager to replace with robots. Automated balls and strikes have been experimented with in the minor leagues in varying forms over the last few seasons: The most popular version so far is not a full robo-ump, but instead a challenge system, where a (human) umpire still calls the zone but teams may challenge a number of pitches, with the resolution played out in seconds on the scoreboard, much like the Hawk-Eye technology used in tennis. (This is the version being tested in some games at major league spring training.) Calling balls and strikes has long been not just the most visible part of umpiring, but its most contentious, the source of some of the most spectacular blowups in the history

BLUE BLOOD

Funneman (right, in the Texas League in 2006) always wanted to ump, while Rieker (in 2000) had a 10-year big league career.



of the game. That could soon meaningfully change. It's all sparked plenty of conversation about how established umpires are (or are not) adjusting. Yet these logistical, cultural and technical shifts mean something for umpires just starting out, too.

Who signs up for the unforgiving grind of becoming an umpire now?

Start with the 56 candidates at MLB Umpire Prospect Development Camp. This is a training ground that did not exist a few years ago. Announced by MLB in 2022 in hopes of recruiting a broader pool of talent and taking more control of umpire development, it's now the main pipeline for entry-level, minor league umpires. The camp teaches and tests the prospective umpires on every sentence of the rule book, in theory and in practice, over 30 days each winter at the old Dodgertown spring training complex in Vero Beach, Fla. Just over half of them are rewarded at the end of the month with umpiring jobs in the lower tiers of the minors.

And while the profession has changed over the last decade, with even bigger changes looming, it still represents the ultimate dream for those few dozen prospects, who devoted a month to studying, training and, of course, learning how to manage situations.

"I've always thought there's a twist in your DNA that makes you want to do this," says MLB director of umpire development Rich Rieker, who spent a decade working his way up the ladder in the minors before umpiring for just as long in the majors. He now oversees the prospect development camp. "All the kids in there think they have it. We try to find out and see who does."

IF EVERY UMPIRE has that certain twist of DNA—whatever characteristic that makes someone volunteer for this—its specifics look different for everyone. This is how they looked for Tyler Funneman. The 42-year-old is MLB's manager of umpire development. But first, he was a 13-year-old in Moweaqua, Ill., who discovered that he loved umpiring. He'd always liked baseball. But this was different, a fascination that became an obsession, a way of thinking about the sport that framed his questions and gave him answers. "I played the game, but even then, I personally looked at it a little bit different compared to, I think, what a normal teenager does," says Funneman.

He began reading everything that he could on how to become a professional ump. "You dig deep, and dig deeper, and then suddenly you say: *That's me*," he says. Funneman began fixating on roster announcements for the MLB All-Star Game—not the players, of course, but the men in blue. He promised himself that when he graduated from high school, he would pull together the money for one of the two umpiring schools that were then the only way into the profession.

FROM TOP: CALEB GROOM; JAY DROWNS/AP

Funneman left for the Wendelstedt Umpire School in Florida when he was 18. "I was young, probably too young to do it, and the way the game has changed, I'm not so sure I would have survived in this era," he says. He got his first job in affiliated ball a year later in 2003.

Thus began the meandering journey through the minors, not unlike that of a player, with low wages and long odds. Funneman got well-acquainted with every town in the New York-Penn League. He internalized what it meant for every game to be a road game. Next was the Midwest League, followed by the Florida State League, then a few seasons in the Texas League. And finally, in his seventh year in the minors, he reached the gateway to the majors.

Funneman got the call to Triple A. The promotion meant a raise, but more importantly, it meant a chance at joining the list of big league call-ups. Here is another way the journey of an umpire is like that of a player. Inevitably, someone in the big leagues gets injured or sick or needs time off, and when that happens, the replacement comes from Triple A.

"I played the game, but even then, I personally looked at it a little bit **different** *compared to what a normal teenager does," says Funneman.*

Many of those umpires are back in the minors soon after. But just like for players, those cups of coffee still hold enough to realize dreams, even if no more comes of them.

Funneman did one full season in Triple A. He did another. He started a third. And on June 17, 2011, before he was scheduled to work a game for the Sacramento River Cats, his phone rang with the call he had been working toward for a decade and dreaming of for much longer. An MLB umpire in Los Angeles was ill. Funneman had to get to Dodger Stadium.

The details are still fresh years later. A mad dash to the airport. Vin Scully calling down to wish him luck. (The broadcaster always noticed when an umpire was new.) Funneman's assignment was third base. The night unfolded without incident, though not without excitement: He got a fan interference call. On that cloudy night in Chavez Ravine, for two hours and 39 minutes, Funneman was in the major leagues. It turned out to be the only game he would ever umpire in MLB, making him the Moonlight Graham of men in blue. But it was enough.

Funneman went into umpire supervision and development the next year and has been doing it ever since. The pathway into the profession is very different for the young umpiring candidates he mentors today.

Nearly every MLB umpire for decades had gotten there in the same way as Funneman. The system—which almost always involved a candidate paying their own way through school—was primarily a product of tradition. MLB finally decided it was not one that served the game well anymore. "It just made so much sense to try to bring it in-house," says MLB senior vice president of on-field operations Michael Hill.

The league introduced its new model in 2023. It had expanded the small camps it had run into a series of umpiring clinics held around the country each summer. Especially promising candidates from those free, one-day clinics would be selected for additional interviews, and the best would be invited to MLB Umpire Prospect Development Camp in January.

The camp now teaches much of the same material as private umpiring schools. But the curriculum is set by MLB. "The messaging wasn't always consistent in how it was being taught," says Hill, who started in the league office in 2021. "We want to be consistent at every level." Crucially, the prospect development camp is free of charge, including housing and meals. That's designed to solve the problem of talented umpires who could not easily drop a few thousand dollars on five weeks of instruction without a job guarantee.

"[We] were losing that talent pool because of finances," Hill says. "When you're talking about trying to get the best and have the best, it has to be a free and open system."

And MLB changed how umpires get promoted early in their careers. Under the old system, umps almost always needed to work at least one full season at every level of the minors, often waiting nearly a decade for a job in the majors. But that no longer made sense in an era where technology can evaluate umpires at every level.

The system is still a grind. But it's a far less rigid one. A particularly skilled umpire can skip a level. Someone with experience in the NCAA or in a foreign league might start in Double A rather than Low A. Everyone still has to climb the ladder. There's just no longer a requirement to hit every rung.

"It was an opportunity to devise a system that's a meritocracy," Hill says. "It rewards the best. If you're a talented young umpire—there's no reason that, if you've mastered a level, you shouldn't be able to move as fast as your talent dictates."

All of these changes underscore a key point: An umpire's job is not what it was two decades ago. While technology is more prominent, and authority is less absolute, MLB does not consider the job less critical. Even a future with a fully automated strike zone would not have a robot making an obstruction call, or handling the dugouts emptying—keeping situations from becoming incidents.

The league's restructured training program produced the 56 candidates selected for the camp in 2025. It was a more diverse bunch than was often the case at traditional umpire schools: They came from 30 states, Puerto Rico, Canada, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic. There were three former minor league players and three women. Some had significant umpiring experience. Some had just a bit. But all had stood out in some way to MLB.

Scouting those potential umpires is more than just seeing how they call balls and strikes, which they do at length in batting cages. There are other questions. How is their footwork? How well do they listen to criticism? How do they get along with not only players and managers, but also potential crewmates? Are they scared of getting hit by the ball? Do they hustle? Is there any sign of that particular twist in their DNA? This is what the league seeks at the clinics and in the ensuing interviews.

That's how MLB got Jacob Ashworth, a schoolteacher from Massachusetts, who had been umpiring since he was a teenager and realized that he wanted to give himself a shot at making it a career. It led to 23-year-old Kyran Bacchus, a former college infielder, who got so overcome when Funneman called with his invite to camp that he screamed in the aisles of his job at Dick's Sporting Goods. It found Alexis Berry *(far right)*, whose only umpiring experience came from local youth tournaments, but that was enough for her to know that calling games satisfied the competitive drive she built growing up as a softball player in Iowa. "It's just challenging myself," she says. "Wanting to be the best gives me that adrenaline rush that keeps everything going."

Everyone in their cohort at camp was keenly aware of how the profession is changing. Yet all of them still came.

★ **UMPIRE TRAINING** requires serious attention to the rules. (That's both the Official Baseball Rules and the separate yet equally dense Major League Baseball Umpire Manual.) It requires an emphasis on conditioning. (Sessions begin at 6 a.m. before the umpires hit the classroom at 8 a.m.) It requires mastering the art of calling pitches, as in literally, verbally delivering calls. (Do not expect any flourishes. New umpires are instructed to deliver calls with no embellishment; they can start getting fancy only as they climb the ladder.) It requires developing a sense of timing and practicing the finer points of crisp signals and cultivating a suitably commanding presence.

And beyond any of those skills, it requires imparting a sense of structure, a deeper understanding of the rhythm of the game.

It's a structure that can be invisible even to people who spend their entire lives playing and working in baseball. That includes someone like Hill—who played at Harvard and for three years in the minors before a long career in front offices, most prominently as general manager of the Marlins, until he began working

"It's just challenging myself," says Berry. "Wanting to be the best gives me that adrenaline rush that keeps everything going."

★ ★ ★

for the commissioner. His first year of supervising umpires still felt completely revelatory.

"I was only talking about an umpire previously when I thought they made a mistake," Hill says. "Now that I'm working with them every day, I'm watching the game differently, and I tell them all the time, 'I never realized how hard your jobs are.'"

Every part of the gig has its own technique.

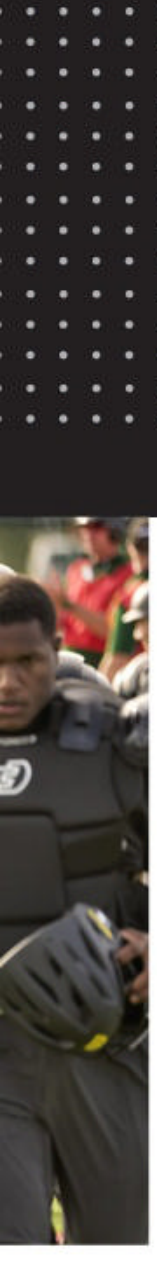
"There's a proper way to give the count," explains Funneman. "There's a proper way to start an inning, to dust off the plate, to stand between innings for both the base umpires and the plate umpire."

Most observers, of course, do not pick up on any of that. The general perception of the job mostly boils down to two things: balls and strikes. And this is one area where technology has meaningfully changed the training. At prospect development camp, the umpires call pitches in the cages under the watchful eye of Trackman, the state-of-the-art data capturing technology. Every call shows up on an adjacent screen almost instantly. The umpires know down to a fraction of an inch whether they were right or wrong. Later that night, they'll be able to log in and review it all. Their performance in these daily training sessions is graded and recorded just like every moment of their journey through the minor leagues will be.

Rieker watches them from behind the cage. The senior director worked his first season in minor league ball in 1983. There was no way to judge his own performance beyond what he thought himself and whatever people happened to yell at him. "You'd watch video tapes if you were lucky to get them," he says. It was not unusual for an umpire to reach the majors without ever seeing quality film of himself working a game.

It was brutal. They all got behind the plate in search of perfection, desperate to get every call right, aiming for a golden ideal of fairness. It was impossible to get there.

"There's so many advantages," Rieker says. "These kids have it so much better than we did." □



THANKS TO A GROUP OF EXCITING young players
WHO ARE STILL MAKING NOISE, 2025 IS SHAPING UP TO
2025 MLB PREVIEW
2025 MLB PREVIEW
WE
KIDDI

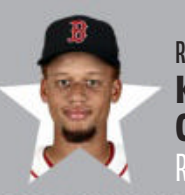
JOE ROBBINS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (SKENES); JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA/IMAGN IMAGES (WITT, OHTANI, SAZAKI); MARK J. REBILAS/IMAGN IMAGES (GILBERT); NATHAN RAY SEEBECK/IMAGN IMAGES (CAMPBELL, CORA); SAM NAVARRO/IMAGN IMAGES (MENDOZA)

2025 AWARD WINNERS

AMERICAN LEAGUE

MVP
BOBBY WITT JR.
Royals • SS

Last year Witt had a 9.4 WAR and won the AL batting title—in his age 24 season. He also won a Gold Glove. In other words: He's valuable.



Rookie of the Year
KRISTIAN CAMPBELL
Red Sox • 2B

He played at three levels in the minors last season and his worst OPS was .898. Meanwhile, Boston's second basemen had a WAR of -2.3.

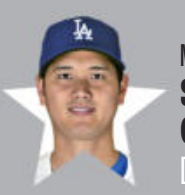
Cy Young
LOGAN GILBERT
Mariners • SP

Breakout alert: Seattle's workhorse led the AL in IP and WHIP while striking out nearly six times as many hitters as he walked.

Manager of the Year
ALEX CORA
Red Sox

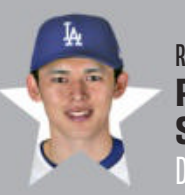
Cora has the Sox poised to break their three-year playoff drought (their last four-year dry spell was in the early 1990s).

NATIONAL LEAGUE



MVP
SHOHEI OHTANI
Dodgers • SP/DH

Now that he's back on the bump, Ohtani is a strong bet to become the first player (non-Bonds division) to three-peat as an MVP.



Rookie of the Year
ROKI SASAKI
Dodgers • SP

The Dodgers own this award. They've had 18 winners; no other team has more than 10. Sasaki, who can touch 102 mph, should make it 19.

Cy Young
PAUL SKENES
Pirates • SP

For those concerned about his durability: As a rookie last year, his best month was September (0.75 ERA, 12.8 strikeouts/9 IP).

Manager of the Year
CARLOS MENDOZA
Mets

Expectations are high in Queens after a 67–40 finish last year—and a new addition you might have read about.

BY Tom Verducci

AN ACE IN THE HOLE

*THE RETURN OF A DOMINANT PITCHER AND A GAME AT A NASCAR RACETRACK ARE AMONG THE **major stories** THAT WILL SHAPE THE SEASON*

1 SHOHEI OHTANI'S RETURN TO THE MOUND

You didn't forget, did you? Before he blew out his right elbow at the end of the 2023 season, Ohtani was one of the best pitchers in baseball. From 2021 to '23 he was 34–16 with a 2.84 ERA and 11.4 strikeouts per nine innings. In that span he ranked second in ERA+, third in strikeout rate and fifth in winning percentage (for a bad Angels team). The Dodgers will slow play his return, especially since surgery to repair his nonthrowing shoulder set back his rehab timeline. You might not see Ohtani on the mound until late April or May and he probably will make only about 20 starts in Los Angeles's six-man rotation. But imagine if the Dodgers get to October with a rotation of Ohtani, Blake Snell, Yoshinobu Yamamoto and Tyler Glasnow. Good luck, world.

2 DATES TO WATCH

› **MARCH 28, MARCH 31** The Rays will open their season at the Yankees' spring training site after Tropicana Field suffered damage in Hurricane Milton. Three days later, the Athletics (no city affiliation as they await their move to Vegas) will play their first home game in West Sacramento. Both venues will be retrofitted to major league standards, but it's not a good look going forward, especially given the summer weather in Sacramento (hot) and Tampa (hot and wet).

› **MAY 16–18** In a schedule change, MLB increased the key interleague rivalry games from four to six. Eleven of the 15 series this weekend showcase key interleague rivalries, including Cubs-White Sox and Mets-Yankees, a showdown that will feature Juan Soto's return to the Bronx.

› **AUG. 2** The Braves play the Reds at Bristol Motor Speedway. At the NASCAR short track, left-handed pull hitters will take aim at Turn 1. Righties will try to go deep into Turn 2. Very cool. The idea of Elly De La Cruz stealing bags at the Speedway is perfect.

› **SEPT. 26–28** Eight of the 15 matchups in the final weekend of the season are among division rivals, including an Orioles-Yankees affair that could decide the AL East. Brace yourself for a fantastic finish.

3 NATIONAL LEAGUE DOMINANCE

Dodgers reliever Joe Kelly wasn't wrong when he called the Yankees the "eighth- or ninth-best" playoff team last season. In 2024 seven NL teams won at least 89 games. Only three AL teams did so. And getting out of the NL might be even harder this year. Of the 17 free agents who signed for $75 million or more the past two offseasons, 12 went to NL teams.

4 THE 50-YEAR DROUGHT?

This is the 50th season of major league baseball in Seattle (including one by the Pilots). The city has never hosted a World Series game, the longest drought by any metropolitan area. Among those playing the waiting game longest, Seattle is followed by Pittsburgh (45 years), Milwaukee (42), Baltimore (41) and Cincinnati (34).

5 MILESTONE WATCH

2,000 HITS
MANNY MACHADO

The Padres' third baseman is 100 hits short of 2,000. He would become only the 55th player to reach 2,000 hits by age 32. Of the previous 10 players this century to get there at that age, five made it to 3,000 (Miguel Cabrera, Albert Pujols, Adrián Beltré, Alex Rodriguez and Derek Jeter) and five did not (Robinson Canó, Édgar Rentería, Iván Rodriguez, Ken Griffey Jr. and Roberto Alomar).

1,000 RBIs
BRYCE HARPER

With 24 more RBIs, Harper will become only the fourth player with 1,000 RBIs, 1,000 walks and 100 stolen bases by age 32. The others are Mickey Mantle, Carl Yastrzemski and Barry Bonds.

1,000 RBIs
MIKE TROUT

Trout needs 46 RBIs for a grand, so why not get it in the same year as Harper, his fellow 2012 Rookie of the Year? Through '19, Trout led Harper in WAR, 72.5 to 32.2. Since then, Harper leads Trout, 18.8 to 13.8.

450 HOME RUNS
2,000 STRIKEOUTS
GIANCARLO STANTON

Stanton needs 21 homers for 450 and another three after that to pass Yaz into 40th place on the all-time list. On the other hand, with just 37 more punchouts, Stanton will become only the eighth player with 2,000 strikeouts.

FROM LEFT: JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO; BILL STREICHER/IMAGN IMAGES; JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA/GETTY IMAGES; MADDIE MEYER/GETTY IMAGES

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

ROB SCHUMACHER/THE REPUBLIC/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

*BEING A CHILD? GREAT. ACTING LIKE ONE? NOT SO MUCH. WHEN IT COMES TO SEEKING AN **autograph**, FOLLOW THESE TIPS FROM THE PROS. AND MAKE SURE YOU KNOW WHO YOU'RE HOUNDING*

BY **Stephanie Apstein**

BASEBALL SEASON is upon us, which means the smell of fresh-mown grass, the taste of a ballpark hot dog, the sound of an autograph hound trying to get a star's attention. We surveyed a dozen players to put together a big leaguer's guide to getting a big league autograph. Some of these tips might seem obvious. According to players, though, they're not.

ACT YOUR AGE

Don't push a child out of the way. Don't use a child to get an autograph for yourself. Don't behave like a child. "If you're an old guy who says, 'It's my birthday, sign for me,' I will definitely not sign," says Dodgers center fielder Tommy Edman. "Or 'It's for my kid, but he couldn't make it today.'"

MIND YOUR MANNERS

Make your mom proud. Don't shout a player's name over and over, and do address him politely. Players are split on first name versus Mr. Last Name from adults, but everyone agrees that the more formal form goes a long way coming from a child. Says Brewers righty Brandon Woodruff, "'Hey, Mr. Woodruff, can we please get an autograph?' That's great. But if you're just like, 'Hey, you, sign this,' it's like, *No, dude!*"

GET THE RIGHT GUY

Nearly every day when Royals outfielder Hunter Renfroe played for the Angels in 2023, a fan flagged him down for an autograph. "Mike!" the fan would beg. "Please sign!" Renfroe was always good-natured as he explained that he was not, in fact, Mike Trout. Nearly every player reports that sort of mix-up. Most of the time, they correct the fan. But if Brewers outfielder Blake Perkins thought you weren't actually going to get reliever Devin Williams's autograph, he'd just forge it for you. "Sometimes you just want to make someone happy," he says.

GET YOUR TIMING DOWN

One day in February, a fan asked Kris Bryant for an autograph—as the Rockies' DH was rounding second base during a drill. To a man, players suggest making your attempt during BP for a pitcher, or just afterward for a hitter. "This is our job," says Brewers first baseman Rhys Hoskins. "We have to get ready to do our job. And I think that gets lost sometimes on people."

DON'T BE CREEPY

All players seem to hate it when fans camp out in the hotel lobby on the road. Things got so bad for the Brewers at one point that they agreed as a team not to sign there, to discourage the behavior. Diamondbacks righty Zac Gallen *(left)* remembers a time someone followed him three blocks in New York; eventually a police officer got involved. Some fans will suss out a player's address, or even send cards to his parents' house. (Incredibly, someone who went to the trouble to write out Woodruff's address sent him a Jimmy Nelson card to sign.)

BE APPROPRIATELY MEMORABLE

More than one player reported having a fan ask to sign their arm and then return to show the tattoo they had inked of the autograph. "It was cool," says Edman. A few Dodgers have signed chain saws for L.A. firefighters. Players also like unique signs or offers of rock-paper-scissors. "Anything that stands out, I'm probably more likely to stop," says Hoskins. But please, says Bryant, "nothing inappropriate."

PICK A WILLING TARGET

Shohei Ohtani might not stop for you. But L.A. prospect Jack Dreyer, who was in major league camp this spring, would love to. "I'm around the best players in the world," he says. "So getting to have somebody actually know my name is pretty cool."

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRYCE WOOD; BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (RUTH, BERRA); WILLIAM JACOBELLIS/STANLEY WESTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (MANTLE); SPX/DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (STEINBRENNER); JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (JETER); NICK LAHAM/GETTY IMAGES (RIVERA); MIKE EHRMANN/GETTY IMAGES (STEINBRENNER BEARD); TETRA IMAGES RF/GETTY IMAGES (BEARDS, 5)

THE HAIR, APPARENT

BACK IN 1978, George Steinbrenner told *The New York Times*, "I have nothing against long hair, per se." Then the Yankees' owner went on to explain how he really had a problem with long hair, per se. Anyone with an unkempt mane or a beard (and, for a time, muttonchop sideburns) would be shipped elsewhere. Well, after 49 clean-shaven years, New York players can finally throw down their razors: They are allowed to sport "well-groomed beards" while wearing the pinstripes. In honor of the new policy, we imagined several Yankees icons—some of the Steinbrenner era, some predating it—with facial hair.

OUTFIELDER
BABE RUTH

OUTFIELDER
MICKEY MANTLE

CATCHER
YOGI BERRA

OWNER
GEORGE STEINBRENNER

SHORTSTOP
DEREK JETER

CLOSER
MARIANO RIVERA

SCOUTING

Reports

2025 MLB PREVIEW

MICHAEL OWENS/
MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

AMERICAN LEAGUE SCOUTING BY
Nick Selbe

NATIONAL LEAGUE SCOUTING BY
Will Laws

BACK ON TOP
Gerrit Cole gives the Yanks a great shot at ending their 15-year title drought.

Postseason Predictions

AL WILD CARD
TIGERS over ASTROS
RED SOX over ORIOLES

AL DIVISION SERIES
YANKEES over RED SOX
TIGERS over GUARDIANS

AL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES
YANKEES over TIGERS

NL WILD CARD
BRAVES over CUBS
PHILLIES over DIAMONDBACKS

NL DIVISION SERIES
DODGERS over PHILLIES
BRAVES over METS

NL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES
DODGERS over BRAVES

WORLD SERIES
YANKEES over DODGERS

AMERICAN

CENTRAL

CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT

After missing the first half of the 2023 season with an elbow injury, Detroit's Tarik Skubal was dominant down the stretch. But no one was prepared for what he did last season: 18 wins, a 2.39 ERA and 228 strikeouts, making the lefty just the 12th pitcher to lead the AL in those three categories in a single season.

DARREN YAMASHITA/IMAGN IMAGES

RIGHT SHIFT
A move from center field should be good for Judge.

EAST

NEW YORK OR... WHO?

THE PAST 30 years of AL East history can be split roughly into halves: pre- and post-Yankees dynasty. From 1996 to 2012, New York won the division an astonishing 13 times in 17 years, and collected five World Series titles.

But since 2013, this division has been defined by parity. During that span, the Red Sox have won the most AL East titles (four) while every other division has a team that finished first at least five times. Also, each AL East team has won the division at least once in the past 12 years.

The Yankees, just like they did in the George Steinbrenner–era glory years, have continued to spend heavily as they look to repeat last year's World Series appearance. This offseason, after losing the Juan Soto sweepstakes to the Mets, New York quickly pivoted by handing out a record contract to two-time All-Star pitcher Max Fried. Still, the Yankees will face stiff competition from the resurgent Red Sox, the thriving Orioles and perhaps even the pesky Rays.

With the additions of Garrett Crochet, Alex Bregman and Walker Buehler, Boston looks poised to reach the postseason for the first time since 2021. Baltimore made the playoffs in each of the last two years but was swept in the first round both times. The organization has a deep collection of promising hitters, but is lacking a top-end starter after Corbin Burnes signed with Arizona. Tampa Bay took a step back last year after posting a .587 winning percentage from '18 to '23—a remarkable stretch that saw the Rays make the playoffs five years in a row. Toronto has a talented yet aging core that could be facing one last hurrah this summer before a franchise reset.

But while the Yankees, the Red Sox and the Orioles appear to have the best squads, if this division has taught us anything in recent years, it's never to count anybody out.

ERICK W. RASCO

1 New York YANKEES

PROJECTED RECORD 99–63

BEST CASE New OF Cody Bellinger looks like the guy who slugged .525 in 2023 and 2B Jazz Chisholm Jr. has a 30-30 season, while Aaron Judge thrives after moving from center to right.

WORST CASE Bellinger looks like the guy who had a .240 OBP in 2021 and Judge gets no support. Juan Soto wins the NL MVP award and leads the Mets to the World Series.

JAZZ CHISHOLM JR.

2 Boston RED SOX

PROJECTED RECORD 91–71

BEST CASE New SP Garrett Crochet builds on his breakout 2024 to win the Cy Young, while OF Roman Anthony shows the form that saw him hit .344 in Triple A. The Sox return to the playoffs.

WORST CASE Walker Buehler resembles the pitcher who had 5.38 ERA for the Dodgers last year more than the one who rallied to close out the Yankees in the World Series.

GARRETT CROCHET

3 Baltimore ORIOLES

PROJECTED RECORD 88–74

BEST CASE 2B Jackson Holliday thrives in his first full season, SP Grayson Rodriguez capably fills the ace role and SS Gunnar Henderson has another massive year.

WORST CASE Rodriguez, who was shut down in September with shoulder problems, spends even more time on the IL, and the front office again does little at the trade deadline.

GUNNAR HENDERSON

4 Tampa Bay RAYS

PROJECTED RECORD 76–86

BEST CASE Led by an All-Star turn from blossoming ace Taj Bradley, the rotation carries the team, and the Rays churn out another 90-win campaign.

WORST CASE The hitting remains anemic as the team's promising young hitters go through growing pains. This year becomes more about the future than the present.

TAJ BRADLEY

5 Toronto BLUE JAYS

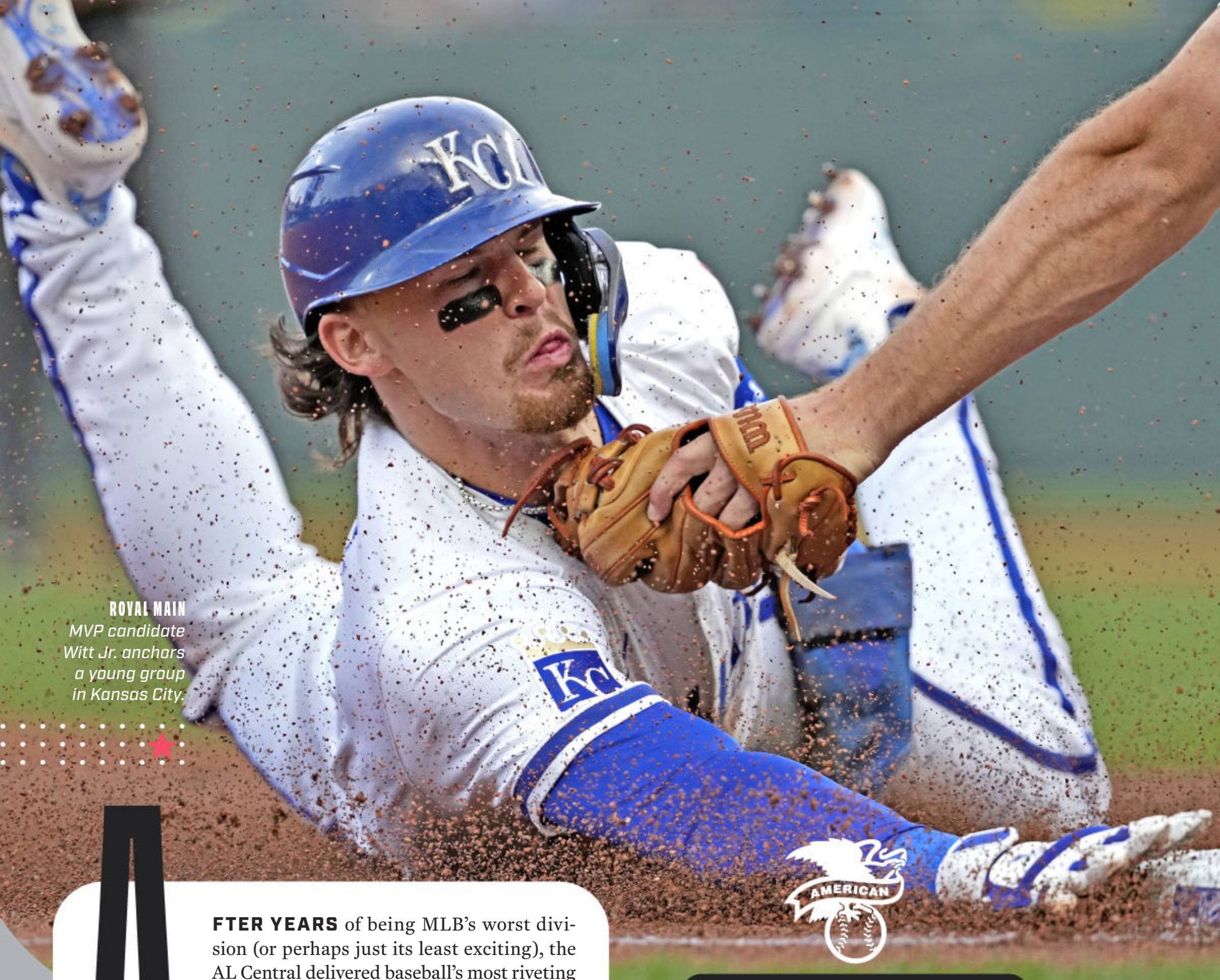
PROJECTED RECORD 74–88

BEST CASE SS Bo Bichette hits like his old self. New 2B Andrés Giménez and RF Anthony Santander bolster the ranks and entice impending free agent Vladimir Guerrero Jr. to stay.

WORST CASE Bichette and RF George Springer continue to decline, as does SP Kevin Gausman. Toronto's contention window closes as Guerrero is traded at the deadline.

VLADIMIR GUERRERO JR.

FROM TOP: ROBERT DEUTSCH/IMAGN IMAGES; MADDIE MALHOTRA/BOSTON RED SOX/GETTY IMAGES; SCOTT TAETSCH/GETTY IMAGES; KIRBY LEE/IMAGN IMAGES; COLE BURSTON/GETTY IMAGES



ROYAL MAIN
MVP candidate Witt Jr. anchors a young group in Kansas City.

AMERICAN

CENTRAL

HERE FOR THE DRAMA

AFTER YEARS of being MLB's worst division (or perhaps just its least exciting), the AL Central delivered baseball's most riveting race in 2024, with the Royals, the Tigers and the Twins fighting to the end for wild-card spots. Add in the division-winning Guardians, and that made the AL Central the only division to have four teams with winning records last season.

Coming into 2025, it's hard to see much separation between those four contenders. The Tigers and Twins were polar opposites down the stretch. Detroit finished 31–13 over its final 44 games, powered by a group of young hitters and a historic performance from Cy Young Award winner Tarik Skubal, who became the first pitcher to win the Triple Crown in a full season since 2011. The Twins, on the other hand, stumbled to a 12–27 finish to miss the playoffs. But Minnesota has a well-constructed roster and should be able to recover from its 2024 flameout.

In Bobby Witt Jr., the Royals have one of the game's brightest stars, a 30–30 threat who was the AL's MVP runner-up at age 24 last year. The Guardians, meanwhile, boast perhaps the sport's most underrated superstar in José Ramírez, who was one homer shy of joining the 40–40 club in '24. Expect a welcome rerun of baseball's most compelling September drama.

And then there are the White Sox, who are looking to turn the page (or maybe just get a new book) after a calamitous 121-loss season. New manager Will Venable will have to chart a course toward respectability with one of the lowest payrolls in the league.

None of the teams in this division appear to have a place among baseball's elite, but four of the five should be in a dogfight for a postseason spot all summer. As for Chicago—well, there's nowhere to go but up. Right?

ED ZURGA/GETTY IMAGES

1 Cleveland GUARDIANS

PROJECTED RECORD 88–74

BEST CASE Tanner Bibee blossoms into an ace, 3B José Ramírez wins his first MVP award and Cleveland's bullpen remains the best in baseball—and this time holds up in October.

WORST CASE A rotation that was rail thin by the end of last season fails to hold up over six months. Trading away 1B Josh Naylor and 2B Andrés Giménez hurts more than anticipated.

JOSÉ RAMÍREZ

2 Detroit TIGERS

PROJECTED RECORD 87–75

BEST CASE LF Riley Greene puts together an MVP-caliber season, and the return of SP Jack Flaherty from the Dodgers gives more support to Tarik Skubal.

WORST CASE A lineup and a starting rotation too reliant on young talent produce inconsistent results, and last year's Cinderella run begins to look like a fairy tale.

RILEY GREENE

3 Minnesota TWINS

PROJECTED RECORD 83–79

BEST CASE SS Carlos Correa, CF Byron Buxton and 3B Royce Lewis all play more than 120 games while a solid pitching staff rebounds to help the Twins to a division title.

WORST CASE Injuries once again plague the Twins' talented trio—who missed a combined 216 games last year—and the rotation is too shallow to support a strong bullpen.

ROYCE LEWIS

4 Kansas City ROYALS

PROJECTED RECORD 80–82

BEST CASE Bobby Witt Jr. continues to grow and wins his first MVP award, while SP Cole Ragans builds on an All-Star season in which he led the AL in strikeouts per nine innings.

WORST CASE Kansas City's hitters beyond Witt underwhelm, and a rotation that saw four pitchers make at least 29 starts last year can no longer dodge the injury bug.

COLE RAGANS

5 Chicago WHITE SOX

PROJECTED RECORD 56–106

BEST CASE The team returns to functionality after last year's embarrassment. Luis Robert Jr. plays well and commnds quality prospects in a trade that bolsters a promising farm system.

WORST CASE While veteran additions help prevent another 121-loss season, Chicago's situation still feels bleak as the team's young talent doesn't show much on the field.

LUIS ROBERT JR.

FROM TOP: BRANDON SLOTER/IMAGE OF SPORT/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID BERDING/GETTY IMAGES; BRACE HEMMELGARN/MINNESOTA TWINS/GETTY IMAGES; ED ZURGA/GETTY IMAGES; PATRICK GORSKI/IMAGN IMAGES

FAMILIAR FACE
Altuve has been a stalwart on Houston's changing roster.

WEST

UNSHAKABLE AT THE TOP

LAST YEAR the AL West champion failed to crack 90 wins for the first time in 10 seasons. Even as fortunes sagged, one thing remained constant—the team that won the division.

The Astros' stranglehold on the AL West held firm, with the streak at seven full seasons. But change is afoot in Houston, as the team said goodbye to outfielder Kyle Tucker, third baseman Alex Bregman and pitcher Justin Verlander this offseason. The remaining pillars from Houston's core are DH Yordan Álvarez and second baseman Jose Altuve.

The Mariners have won between 85 and 90 games in each of the last four years, but have just one postseason appearance to show for it. Seattle boasts perhaps the best rotation in baseball (the M's starters had a 3.38 ERA in 2024) and would need merely average hitting (the squad hit .224 last year) to make a return to the playoffs. But ownership has been reluctant to invest in the roster beyond the massive 12-year, fully guaranteed extension given to outfielder Julio Rodríguez in 2022.

The Rangers, who stumbled to 78 wins a year after capturing the franchise's first World Series, should be helped by a slew of players returning from injury. Healthy years from Jacob deGrom, Jon Gray and Tyler Mahle would do wonders for a rotation that lagged near the bottom of the league a season ago. Offensively, the Rangers need a return to form from second baseman Marcus Semien, right fielder Adolís García and catcher Jonah Heim, who saw their combined WAR drop from 14.5 in 2023 to 5.5 last year.

As for the A's and Angels? Well, Sacramento becoming a big league city is a curious wrinkle in the saga of the nomadic A's slow move to Las Vegas. The Angels, meanwhile, appear to be once again resisting a much-needed teardown in favor of continuing their march through purgatory.

THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES

1 Houston ASTROS

BEST CASE New 3B Isaac Paredes thrives, while Hunter Brown develops into the staff ace. DH Yordan Álvarez and new 1B Christian Walker keep the offense chugging.

PROJECTED RECORD 87–75

WORST CASE Houston's aging hitters start to decline earlier than expected, leading to a third-place finish and the front office taking a hard look at the reset button.

YORDAN ÁLVAREZ

2 Seattle MARINERS

BEST CASE Julio Rodríguez, 24, enjoys a resurgent season and gets enough help from the rest of the lineup that Seattle makes the playoffs for the first time since 2022.

PROJECTED RECORD 84–78

WORST CASE The offense, which ranked 10th in the AL in runs, remains middling, placing too much strain on the rotation as the M's continue their cycle of hovering around 85 wins.

JULIO RODRÍGUEZ

3 Texas RANGERS

BEST CASE A healthy Jacob deGrom and young SPs Kumar Rocker and Jack Leiter anchor a top-10 rotation. Corey Seager's OPS returns to its torrid level of 2023.

PROJECTED RECORD 84–78

WORST CASE An older roster suffers persistent injuries, while OFs Wyatt Langford and Evan Carter go through growing pains. The depleted bullpen squanders too many leads.

COREY SEAGER

4 ATHLETICS

BEST CASE With RF Lawrence Butler and DH Brent Rooker delivering at the plate, Sacramento's Sutter Health Park is rocking. SS Jacob Wilson wins AL Rookie of the Year.

PROJECTED RECORD 70–92

WORST CASE A rotation short on household names flounders and the novelty of a 14,014-seat park gives way to dismay about the team's awkward handling of its move to Las Vegas.

LAWRENCE BUTLER

5 Los Angeles ANGELS

BEST CASE SS Zach Neto and C Logan O'Hoppe blossom into All-Stars. OF Mike Trout plays a full season after spending most of the last four years on the shelf.

PROJECTED RECORD 64–98

WORST CASE None of the young pitchers are consistent. Trout remains unable to stay on the field, grows tired of the persistent losing and requests a trade out of Anaheim.

ZACH NETO

FROM TOP: LUKE HALES/GETTY IMAGES; CHARLES LECLAIRE/IMAGN IMAGES; RON JENKINS/GETTY IMAGES; KAMIL KRZACZYNSKI/IMAGN IMAGES; JOE SARGENT/GETTY IMAGES

CENTRAL

FACE OF THE FRANCHISE

After hitting 25 homers and stealing a league-leading 67 bases, Reds shortstop Elly De La Cruz finished eighth in NL MVP voting, just the second Cincinnati player to finish that high this century. Another perk for the 23-year-old fan favorite: He was named the cover athlete for MLB The Show 25. *Could bigger things lie ahead? In December, one agent told* The Cincinnati Enquirer *he could see De La Cruz earning baseball's first $1 billion contract.*

KEVIN D. LILES/ATLANTA BRAVES/GETTY IMAGES

PRIZED ASSET
Sale won a Cy Young in his first season in Atlanta.

EAST

THE RULE OF THREE

THE NL EAST is the only division to produce three playoff teams every year since the field expanded to 12 teams in 2022. And it's easy to imagine that streak will continue. The Phillies, the Braves and the Mets all enter this season with the most plausible World Series aspirations in the National League this side of L.A.

The Mets have been targeting 2025 as a breakout season for a couple of years now, so their NLCS appearance came ahead of schedule. The signing of Juan Soto will obviously boost their offense, but the effectiveness of the rotation, which had a stellar 3.46 ERA after the All-Star break, will determine their ceiling.

New York will have to knock off the Phillies, who won their first division title since 2011. The team sent a franchise-record eight players to the All-Star Game last season. But the club's core is comprised mostly of players in their 30s and runs the risk of going stale soon.

The Braves, who had a six-year run atop the division end last season, still possess an enviable group of position players. But the pitching staff that led the majors with a 3.49 ERA is likely to regress after losing starters Max Fried and Charlie Morton in free agency.

The Nationals leaned into small ball last year, leading MLB with 223 stolen bases and ranking last in the NL with 135 homers. The result: just 660 runs, second-worst in the league. Still, outfielder James Wood, and top prospect Dylan Crews have the potential to add much-needed pop to the Nats' attack.

The Marlins are one of three teams given a 0% chance to make the postseason by Baseball Prospectus's PECOTA projection system, and while cruel, it seems accurate. Miami, which had the NL's lowest-scoring offense for the third year running and employed 45 different pitchers, is clearly in tank mode.

JOHN FISHER/GETTY IMAGES

1 New York METS

PROJECTED RECORD 94–68

BEST CASE RF Juan Soto's arrival in Queens has the same effect it did in the Bronx, except the Mets take it a step further and win the World Series. LeBron attends and sports a Mets hat.

WORST CASE After a strong 2024, Sean Manaea's ERA balloons to previous levels, and question-mark pitchers Kodai Senga, Frankie Montas and Clay Holmes struggle as well.

SEAN MANAEA

2 Philadelphia PHILLIES

PROJECTED RECORD 92–70

BEST CASE The rotation, which sent three players to the All-Star Game last year, repeats its magic, while 1B Bryce Harper wins his third MVP and, finally, his first championship.

WORST CASE Cy Young runner-up Zack Wheeler shows his age (35), while SS Trea Turner loses a step in the third season of his 11-year deal. The Phillies crash out in the wild card.

ZACK WHEELER

3 Atlanta BRAVES

PROJECTED RECORD 88–74

BEST CASE RF Ronald Acuña Jr. and SP Spencer Strider bounce back from injury, and 1B Matt Olson returns to his '23 level of production (when he hit 54 homers).

WORST CASE SPs Chris Sale, Reynaldo López and Spencer Schwellenbach all regress after fantastic Atlanta debuts in 2024, leaving the rotation unequipped for a playoff push.

MATT OLSON

4 Washington NATIONALS

PROJECTED RECORD 73–89

BEST CASE LF James Wood makes the leap to All-Star, RF Dylan Crews is named NL Rookie of the Year and Washington earns its first winning season since the 2019 title campaign.

WORST CASE None of the starting pitchers distinguish themselves as being anything more than serviceable as the Nats fail to match their 71-win mark from the last two seasons.

JAMES WOOD

5 Miami MARLINS

PROJECTED RECORD 55–107

BEST CASE Former Cy Young winner Sandy Alcantara brings in a haul at the trade deadline and OF Griffin Conine, son of Jeff "Mr. Marlin" Conine, helps fans remember better days.

WORST CASE Alcantara looks like a shell of himself in his return from Tommy John surgery. The Marlins threaten the record for losses in a season (121) set by the White Sox in 2024.

SANDY ALCANTARA

FROM TOP: GREGORY FISHER/IMAGN IMAGES; BILL STREICHER/IMAGN IMAGES; WENDELL CRUZ/IMAGN IMAGES; GEOFF BURKE/IMAGN IMAGES; MITCHELL LAYTON/GETTY IMAGES

CREW LEADER *Contreras had career bests in hits and home runs in 2024.*

CHRIS BERNACCHI/DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

CENTRAL

FLAVOR OF THE WEAK

THE NL CENTRAL has a well-earned reputation for weakness. Its teams are on a collective 10-series postseason losing streak, and the division hasn't produced more than one playoff participant since 2021. But at least the teams should provide some regular-season suspense. Last year's 17-game gap between the first-place Brewers and the last-place Pirates was the smallest in any division.

The Cubs tried to separate themselves from the pack this offseason by acquiring Astros outfielder Kyle Tucker and aggressively adding to their collection of arms. If Shota Imanaga and Justin Steele become a strong one-two punch in the rotation, the Cubs should claim their first full-season playoff berth since 2018.

Milwaukee was FanGraphs' highest-rated defensive team in the NL last year, had the league's second-best ERA (3.65) and had a top-five MVP finisher in catcher William Contreras. There may be a limit, however, to what this franchise can accomplish amid its payroll constraints and seemingly constant roster turnover.

Cincinnati displayed admirable urgency this offseason, luring future Hall of Fame manager Terry Francona out of retirement. But despite incremental improvement through the trade market, the Reds have little proven star power beyond shortstop Elly De La Cruz and pitcher Hunter Greene. Pittsburgh has 2024 Rookie of the Year Paul Skenes but its biggest offseason move was to acquire infielder Spencer Horwitz, who doesn't have the glove to excel at second or the bat to thrive at first.

The Cardinals initiated a self-termed "reset" after posting their worst two-year winning percentage (.475) since top executive John Mozeliak first joined St Louis in 1995. He'll give way by 2026 to team adviser Chaim Bloom, a former Red Sox GM who didn't exactly endear himself to the Boston faithful.

1 Chicago CUBS

PROJECTED RECORD 90–72

BEST CASE The Cubs cruise to their first playoff berth since 2020. New RF Kyle Tucker signs an extension on the same day as Sammy Sosa's fence-mending Wrigley homecoming.

WORST CASE SS Dansby Swanson continues to decline offensively. Chicago again finishes behind manager Craig Counsell's former team in Milwaukee to just miss out on a playoff berth.

DANSBY SWANSON

2 Milwaukee BREWERS

PROJECTED RECORD 83–79

BEST CASE Elite D and the bat of OF Jackson Chourio allow second-year manager Pat Murphy to do something no Brewers skipper has ever done: win two playoff series in one season.

WORST CASE The lineup, missing Willy Adames, lacks pop, and the rotation is steady but unspectacular. After shoulder surgery, Brandon Woodruff no longer hurls like an ace.

BRANDON WOODRUFF

3 Cincinnati REDS

PROJECTED RECORD 79–83

BEST CASE After missing all of 2024 with a shoulder injury, Matt McLain, who hit 16 homers in 89 games as a rookie in '23, teams with new IF Gavin Lux to give Cincy a playoff-worthy attack.

WORST CASE Offseason moves reshuffle a mediocre deck. New skipper Terry Francona heads back to retirement after the Reds' playoff series win drought extends to 30 years.

MATT MCLAIN

4 Pittsburgh PIRATES

PROJECTED RECORD 73–89

BEST CASE Oneil Cruz joins the 30–30 club and fully adjusts to center field after showing promise at the position late last year. Paul Skenes wins his first Cy Young Award.

WORST CASE Andrew McCutchen's 17-year career ends with a whimper, and Pittsburgh's seventh straight losing season prompts firings across the organization.

ONEIL CRUZ

5 St. Louis CARDINALS

PROJECTED RECORD 72–90

BEST CASE The veteran rotation stays healthy and the defense is strong. Former top prospect RF Jordan Walker emulates the success of SS Masyn Wynn (4.9 WAR last year).

WORST CASE The pitching staff struggles, lacking strikeout producers. 2B Nolan Gorman (.203 BA, 151 Ks) looks like a bust as he whiffs even more frequently than in 2024.

JORDAN WALKER

FROM TOP: DAVID BANKS/IMAGN IMAGES; MATT MARTON/IMAGN IMAGES; KIRBY LEE/IMAGN IMAGES; TIM HEITMAN/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; NICK WOSIKA/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

SOPHOMORE JUMP? *Merrill will look to build on his stellar rookie season.*

WEST

THE RICH GET RICHER

HAT DO you get the team that has everything? More pitching, it seems. This offseason the Dodgers signed starting pitchers Blake Snell and Roki Sasaki, as well as reliever Tanner Scott. It's why the defending World Series champs are overwhelming favorites to win their 12th NL West crown in 13 years and also their third championship in six years. Manager Dave Roberts's biggest challenge may be keeping his team focused throughout the regular season.

The Diamondbacks put up an MLB-high 886 runs last season, outscoring the Dodgers by 44 runs, but still missed the playoffs because of their pitching. Arizona sought to remedy that issue by signing 2021 Cy Young winner Corbin Burnes to a six-year, $210 million deal.

Having languished around .500 in each of the last three years, the Giants hired franchise favorite Buster Posey to lead their front office. He immediately did what his predecessor Farhan Zaidi could not and signed a premium free agent, shortstop Willy Adames. One big question is how former Cy Young winners Robbie Ray, 33, and new addition Justin Verlander, 42, will perform following injury-plagued campaigns.

San Diego lost several key contributors in free agency, but the Padres should still field a competitive team around its remaining veterans and newcomer Jackson Merrill, who slugged .500 while playing center field as a rookie. While the club isn't spending like it did under late owner Peter Seidler, the signing of pitcher Nick Pivetta is a positive development.

The Rockies seem content to keep working the same formula that has resulted in them losing 204 games over the past two years. The most notable early offseason additions are infielders Thairo Estrada and Kyle Farmer, who both registered negative WAR in 2024.

ORLANDO RAMIREZ/GETTY IMAGES

1 Los Angeles DODGERS

BEST CASE SP Yoshinobu Yamamoto is healthy all year, and with Shohei Ohtani back on the mound, the Dodgers break the MLB season record of 116 wins.

PROJECTED RECORD 109–53

WORST CASE Any likely scenario still includes an NL West title. But an NLDS loss to the Giants marks the third postseason exit to a different division rival since 2022.

YOSHINOBU YAMAMOTO

2 Arizona DIAMONDBACKS

BEST CASE Corbin Burnes is in Cy Young form while CF Corbin Carroll rebounds from his sophomore slump. Arizona picks up in-season bullpen help to fuel a successful playoff run.

PROJECTED RECORD 90–72

WORST CASE Burnes struggles to adapt to Arizona's offense-friendly field. Josh Naylor is no Christian Walker at first base, and the 2023 pennant looks more and more like a fluke.

CORBIN CARROLL

3 San Diego PADRES

BEST CASE GM A.J. Preller addresses roster holes with a massive trade return for pitcher Dylan Cease. Jackson Merrill, 21, cements his star status and keys a run to the NLCS.

PROJECTED RECORD 83–79

WORST CASE Xander Bogaerts is exposed defensively in his move back to shortstop. The new ownership is reluctant to spend for the supplemental depth the roster needs.

XANDER BOGAERTS

4 San Francisco GIANTS

BEST CASE CF Jung Hoo Lee sparks the lineup in his return from shoulder surgery. SPs Robbie Ray and Justin Verlander stay healthy, and the Giants make the playoffs.

PROJECTED RECORD 81–81

WORST CASE Logan Webb is the only starting pitcher who is injury-free and productive. SS Willy Adames's stats suffer in Oracle Park's cavernous confines.

ROBBIE RAY

5 Colorado ROCKIES

BEST CASE SS Ezequiel Tovar leads an exciting attack, while OF Kris Bryant, who's played just 159 games in three seasons, shows life. The draft lottery gods smile on Colorado.

PROJECTED RECORD 57–105

WORST CASE The Rockies have MLB's highest ERA for the fourth straight year. GM Bill Schmidt again holds onto Colorado's tradeable veterans at the deadline.

EZEQUIEL TOVAR

FROM TOP: ERICK W. RASCO; MIKE CHRISTY/GETTY IMAGES; BRANDON SLOTER/GETTY IMAGES; STAN SZETO/IMAGN IMAGES; JESSE JOHNSON/IMAGN IMAGES

The azaleas are in bloom in **AUGUSTA**, which means majors season is near. Join us for a (nine-hole) stroll through the stories to watch at the biggest tournaments of 2025

ANDREW REDINGTON/GETTY IMAGES

THE HOLE

TRUTH

FRIDAY FUNK

McIlroy's quest for an elusive green jacket (and career slam) in 2024 was derailed by a second-round 77.

1

LAST SUMMER BRYSON DECHAMBEAU WON THE U.S. OPEN AND BECAME THE MOST BUZZED-ABOUT PLAYER IN THE MEN'S GAME. IS HE STILL AT THE CENTER OF THE GOLF CONVERSATION?

Through sheer will and entertainment, DeChambeau occupies a lofty perch in the game, even though his only victory in 2024 was that U.S. Open triumph at Pinehurst. It was a big one, of course, and solidified a comeback of sorts for DeChambeau, whose game had fallen off after his first U.S. Open title in 2020 as injuries plagued him.

DeChambeau made a point to be more of a factor in the major championships, and that paid off last year as he finished tied for sixth at the Masters after holding the first-round lead; second to Xander Schauffele at the PGA Championship, making a final-hole birdie that forced Schauffele to do the same; and first at the U.S. Open at Pinehurst after an epic duel with Rory McIlroy.

DeChambeau didn't win once last summer on the LIV Golf tour, but he kept his name in the limelight with his popular YouTube channel, which is approaching one million subscribers. Whether it was his "Break 50" series, where he tries to set a course record, or repeated attempts to make a hole-in-one while hitting over his house to a backyard green, his videos have proven to be so popular that DeChambeau now employees more than a half dozen people to help create the content.

But his legacy will be determined by his play in the majors and DeChambeau—who in November 2020 declared that Augusta National was like a par-67 for him and later derided for it—seemed to figure some things out last year. Getting on the leaderboard again this year will continue to keep his name in the conversation. *—Bob Harig*

ALEX SLITZ/GETTY IMAGES

FINISHING TOUCH
As McIlroy surged to the lead then collapsed, DeChambeau scrambled his way to a 71 on Sunday to eke out his second U.S. Open win.

2

For the 11th year in a row, Rory McIlroy arrives at Augusta with a chance to win his first green jacket and complete the career Slam. Is this finally Rory's time? If not the Masters, will he win a major somewhere else this year?

McIlroy's major drought has evolved from curious to maddening to now—following last summer's U.S. Open meltdown in at Pinehurst, when he bogeyed three of the final four holes to lose by a stroke—Shakespearean. A bagful of personal demons has accompanied McIlroy on each of his trips to Augusta, ever since he coughed up a four-shot lead with 18 holes to play as a baby-faced 21-year-old in 2011. The chance for McIlroy to also polish off a career Grand Slam, which has only been accomplished by five players in history, makes each of his spins down Magnolia Lane even more freighted. McIlroy is desperate for a breakthrough anywhere. Augusta would no doubt be his top choice. It would also appear to be the most unlikely.

He does carry a tailwind into the season thanks to a nice win in January at Pebble Beach, where he played steady golf in tough conditions over the closing holes, which is where in his recent near-misses—including last summer's crack-up at Pinehurst—he has wavered.

Some upcoming venues should suit his eye. The PGA Championship in May will be staged outside Charlotte at Quail Hollow, a track that typically hosts an annual PGA Tour stop that McIlroy just so happens to have won four times, including last year. The U.S. Open is at brawny old Oakmont, which is ripe for McIlroy's elite power-and-precision combo. The British Open heads back to Portrush in his Irish homeland, where in 2019 he shot a nervy opening-round 79 before rallying for a 65 to miss the cut by one shot, demonstrating that he can go low there if he stays out of his own way. Add it all up and this looks like a promising summer for McIlroy to end his major skid once and for all.

But first, as ever, it starts with Augusta. Ultimately here's where it feels like things stand: I would like to see McIlroy win a green jacket this year. You would like to see McIlroy win a green jacket this year. It would be a wonderful story if McIlroy won a green jacket this year.

I will be rooting for it. I will not bet on it. *—Jeff Ritter*

3 *Scottie Scheffler's start to 2025 was delayed after a Christmas Day pasta-making accident required surgery on his right hand. Is he still the man to beat this season?*

That has to go down as the most shocking ravioli-induced injury in the history of the sport. Jokes aside, Scheffler started his 2025 a couple weeks later than expected and although he didn't win right away, he notched a couple of quick top-25 finishes while showing no lingering effects. Unless a player makes a big run early in the season—or another uncooked noodle does him in—Scheffler will likely enter all four majors as the betting favorite. —J.R.

4 *As of late February, LIV Golf and the PGA Tour were continuing to work toward a compromise where both would somehow flourish as a for-profit entity. Will LIV golfers ever have direct access to playing the Masters?*

It is quite possible the Masters announces an exemption category for LIV Golf players starting in 2026. But don't expect it to be robust. And don't be surprised if there is not a direct invitation at all. The U.S. Open and the British Open have both offered a single spot to the top player on LIV's individual points list. LIV supporters cry foul and believe it should be more. The Masters has given an invite to Joaquin Niemann for the second straight year, while never acknowledging his success on LIV Golf. That suggests Augusta National might just be fine with the way things are now, when they can consider players on a case-by-case basis. —B.H.

5 *Has Augusta National fully recovered from damage inflicted by Hurricane Helene last fall?*

Only the keenest of observers will notice any difference at the home of the Masters. Undoubtedly, there will be some bare spots where there used to be trees, as Augusta National and the surrounding area suffered considerable damage and power outages. But the playing condition of the course, according to chairman Fred Ridley, will not be impacted. The 16th green was damaged by a falling tree and closed for a time after the club reopened in the fall, but once everyone arrives it will be difficult to notice a difference. —B.H.

6 *Besides DeChambeau, are any other LIV golfers worthy of our attention?*

Jon Rahm's 2024 might have felt like five years: joining LIV Golf's Legion XIII team and facing all the backlash that comes with it, playing poorly through a foot injury in the spring and early summer, suffering a Sunday collapse at the Paris Olympics—yet ending the season on a high note with the LIV individual title. A calmer 2025 could mean a return to major-winning form.

Tyrrell Hatton, like Rahm, wears his emotions on his sleeve and that makes for great social clips—and now he has worked his way into top-10 status. A win to start 2025 in Dubai against a great field ratchets up the expectations for the major season and what should be a spot on his fourth consecutive European Ryder Cup team.

And of course there's Brooks Koepka, whose five LIV titles are the most in the league's first three years. We'll have to let history decide what that means; Koepka himself prizes majors above all else and his 2024 campaign was lackluster with nothing better than T-26s at the PGA and U.S. Open. But at age 34, he's got plenty of time to add to his haul of five majors, potentially including an elusive green jacket. —*John Schwarb*

IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THE MASTERS ANNOUNCES AN EXEMPTION CATEGORY FOR LIV GOLF PLAYERS STARTING IN 2026. BUT DON'T EXPECT IT TO BE ROBUST.

7 *After Augusta, which of the following three majors will be the most compelling?*

Oakmont is a U.S. Open course straight from central casting: long, tight and with the country's fastest greens. (The members insist on it.) It hosts our national championship for the 10th time, and eight of the previous nine winners (including Dustin Johnson, Ernie Els, Johnny Miller, Jack Nicklaus and Ben Hogan) own multiple majors. There will be no fluke champion and, with the lowest Oakmont Open-winning score being just five under, carnage will likely be on the menu. —J.S.

ERICK W. RASCO

LEGION OF BOOM

Rahm capped an uneasy 2024 with a LIV individual title, then finished tied for second and sixth in the first two events of '25.

8 *And looking even farther ahead, it's a Ryder Cup year. Moving down the list of A-list stars, who are some dark horses that could sneak onto the U.S. team at Bethpage?*

At 35, Russell Henley has quietly become a top-20 player, having finished progressively better in every major in 2024 (T-38 Masters, T-23 PGA, T-7 U.S. Open, fifth at the British Open) and a tie for fourth in the FedEx Cup. Another strong major season could put the Georgia Bulldog on the team, and he'd be the kind of gritty player a New York crowd can get behind.

Maverick McNealy could be another rookie Ryder Cupper, at age 29. The former world amateur No. 1 who won for the first time on the PGA Tour last November would be the smartest guy in the team room (he has an engineering degree from Stanford) and a welcome new face for a team dogged by "boys club" accusations following the disastrous 2023 Ryder Cup in Rome. —J.S.

9 *Time to pick winners. Give us a champion for each of the four majors and the Ryder Cup.*

Bob Harig	*Jeff Ritter*	*John Schwarb*
Masters Bryson DeChambeau	**Masters** Xander Schauffele	**Masters** Scottie Scheffler
PGA Championship Rory McIlroy	**PGA Championship** Ludvig Åberg	**PGA Championship** Rory McIlroy
U.S. Open Scottie Scheffler	**U.S. Open** Bryson DeChambeau	**U.S. Open** Jon Rahm
British Open Jon Rahm	**British Open** Thomas Detry	**British Open** Tyrrell Hatton
Ryder Cup Europe 14 ½ to 13 ½	**Ryder Cup** United States 17 to 11	**Ryder Cup** United States 15 to 13

UPSTART START
Cignetti's first Hoosiers team was projected to finish 17th in the Big Ten yet qualified for a CFP berth.

IAN JOHNSON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

ONE ON ONE

WITH

CURT CIGNETTI

If you Google him (as he invited the world to do), you'll discover that the **INDIANA COACH** wins everywhere he goes, even as the game changes radically around him

by L. JON WERTHEIM

IT MADE for one of the more memorable catchphrases of last year's college football season. Tired of being asked about both his origin story and how exactly he intended to apply defib paddles to Indiana's left-for-dead football program, the Hoosiers' new coach departed from his usual geniality and offered—forgive the pun—a curt rejoinder: "It's pretty simple. I win. Google me."

Curt Cignetti had a point. At each of his previous three coaching stops, he left the program in better shape than he found it. Despite Cignetti's track record, the skepticism that greeted his arrival in Bloomington was well-founded. The Hoosiers were coming off a 3–9 season (1–8 in the Big Ten), adding to Indiana's argument for being the least successful major program in Division I history. Head coach Tom Allen was fired the day after the Hoosiers' 2023 season ended, leaving with a losing record as—get this—*every Indiana football coach has done since 1948*. "I knew the history," Cignetti, 63, says with a shrug. "I still believed."

Google Cignetti today and the most recent entry will reveal what happened last season. He didn't simply turn around the Indiana program. He turned the Hoosiers into a Michigan-beating powerhouse, the first bowl-eligible team in the country. Indiana won its first 10 games. Cignetti got an in-season contract extension, paying him $8 million per year through 2032.

After losing on the road to Ohio State, the eventual national champion, the Hoosiers starched in-state rival Purdue 66–0. Though the season ended with a loss to Notre Dame in the first round of the CFP—launching a thousand bad-faith hot takes about whether they were worthy of the playoffs—the Hoosiers finished 11–2 and ranked No. 10, above the likes of Clemson, Miami and Alabama.

INDY ROCK

Cignetti will welcome back Mikail Kamara (6), who anchored the nation's No. 2 defense.

RICH JANZARUK/HERALD-TIMES/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI/IMAGN IMAGES

Cignetti turned around the program—"flipped the culture" in corporatized coachspeak—with a mix of old and new. The son of a longtime coach, he brought to bear an old-school sensibility. Discipline. Early mornings and late nights. Unsparing preparation. Unsparing coaching clichés. Plan the work—*work the plan*.

But he also leaned into the realities of contemporary college football. That is, Cignetti drank enthusiastically from the trough that is the transfer portal, bringing in 31 new players, 13 of whom accompanied him from James Madison, a school he led to an 11–2 record in its second year in FBS. Cignetti also took pains to reach out to donors and fatten IU's NIL reserves.

The challenge now is to make sure last season was no happy accident. Google it: Indiana's 2025 schedule will be tougher. Opposing programs will prepare more thoroughly. That is, when they are trying to poach the Hoosiers' best players. So it goes in College Football, 2025 A.D.

ONE ONE

WITH
CURT CIGNETTI

But the coach remains swollen with optimism. as he explained in a postseason postmortem:

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: Now that you've gotten a little bit of detachment, this past season was ... ?

CURT CIGNETTI: You know how it is in this business. You really don't have much time to reflect. You're always juggling a lot of balls and when one season ends, another begins. Recruiting, development, retention—never-ending. Just judging it based on the response of the fans, the alumni base and everybody around town, people were affected by our success in a positive way. That to me is the most gratifying thing—sort of like the rising tide lifts all boats.

SI: The business has changed so much. How do you like being a GM and a head coach?

CC: I was thinking that last summer, too.

SI: So put us in the room. How were you turning around a program, staffing up and also building a roster all at the same time?

"At the end of the day, it's football," Cignetti says. "I mean, we got our nutrition centers, our weight rooms are bigger. But **IT'S FOOTBALL**, *right?"*

CC: My first day here, the whole offense was in the transfer portal—10 of them. At one point we were down to under 40 [players]. So I brought four or five guys on the plane with me, and it was a really quick process. You just always had something to do. You're interviewing the old staff. You're hiring a new staff. You're interviewing the players that are in the portal. You're evaluating portal guys. You're getting them on campus. Honestly, I didn't see the light of day. I think my first day was Dec. 1 and the early signing date was maybe the 21st, but we brought 22 transfers in there, all two, three-year starters I knew in my heart we'd flip the roster, and we'd need a lot of new guys. After talking to the guys that were here last year, I was like, *Oooh, we need some new faces*. The JMU thing was a big part of that.

SI: How do you explain winning with so many kids who weren't necessarily recruited by Big Ten–caliber programs out of high school?

CC: The good ones at that level certainly can play at [the Power 5] level. In the past, they've gone on and done really well in the NFL, too. Now they just transfer up, you know, they have a good year and G5 has become like Triple A.

SI: What's the biggest difference program-wise between a James Madison and a school like Indiana?

CC: Well, we're committing pretty significant financial resources here. Money, money, money. Bigger stadiums. More exposure. You're on TV more. More things I got to do like this [interview]. But at the end of the day, it's football. I mean, we got our nutrition centers, our weight rooms are bigger. But it's football, right?

SI: "Google me" was one of the great lines of the college football season. Did you plan that or was that off the cuff?

CC: Off the cuff. That was signing day, press conference. I hadn't seen the light of day for three weeks. I was tired, really tired. I got the same question for about the 15th time at the end of the press conference, and I just put my head down and kept it simple.

STATE-MENT

Returning wide receiver Elijah Sarratt helped torch Purdue, scoring two touchdowns.

SI: When you got the job, I kept hearing, *This guy's a turnaround artist*. Fair assessment?

CC: I gave a speech at the AFCA Convention. Won one of those Coach of the Year awards. All the ones that they voted on in December. But then the ones they voted on in January I lost. I wonder why. Ha, ha. But no, this is my fourth head coaching job. And we have improved the win total by an average of five wins a year at every place.

SI: The other scouting report I kept getting was, *He's really organized*. How do you organize?

CC: A lot of these yellow legal pads. I'm starting to gravitate toward card stock only. I'm not a computer guy. I've never done a PowerPoint presentation. I can't do Excel.

JEREMY HOGAN/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

by **PAT FORDE**

SILLY SEASON IS SILLIER THAN EVER

A familiar face taking over in a new place and a quarterback with a familiar name in a new role highlight the NCAA's spring story lines

AS CURT CIGNETTI prepares for his encore in Bloomington, this spring the college football universe will be paying attention to a wide range of stories that will shape the 2025 season.

Disappearing spring games. Nebraska has announced it will not play a game. So has USC. Others are doing the same. The reason? Portal poaching.

Many coaches believe showcasing an entire roster in a game format leads to competitors enticing players to transfer, especially those who are backups and might get more playing time elsewhere. The portal, plus potential changes to the sport's calendar, have put spring games on the endangered list.

The Hoodie takes over in Chapel Hill. Bill Belichick, arguably the most surprising hire in college football history, will put his first North Carolina team on the field, well, sometime. The Tar Heels still hadn't announced practice dates as of late February. The entire sport is waiting to see what Chapel Bill's first college team will look like.

The Arch Era is upon us. After patiently playing a backup role for two seasons, Arch Manning finally steps forward as the starter at Texas. The hype is coming with him: The Longhorns are SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's way-too-early

SI: Someone was just telling me Michigan's got a $10 million kid. And I'm thinking that it's just normalized. Did you ever think you'd see a day when, without blinking, we'd talk about $10 million players?

CC: No, absolutely not. But you just take it as it comes. I've been a college football fan all my life because my dad was a coach and I knew I wanted to coach at a young age. And, you know, if you want to be successful and thrive, you gotta adapt and adjust. So just tell me what the rules are and, you know, I'll adjust.

SI: What's the process when someone enters the portal, and what's the process for figuring out how much to dip into the NIL bucket?

CC: Every year it changes so much. You come out of the season, you assess your needs and then you're evaluating. You like a guy? You get on the phone with him. This year, they all have agents. That wasn't the case last year. They all got agents now. So the agent gives you the price: *This is what he's been offered [elsewhere]*, and you're either in the game or you're not. Now, I'm sure in many cases it's an inflated price, right? Because there's not a lot of transparency. But you either get in the game or you don't.

SI: What do you think your dad would say if he were watching?

CC: My dad passed three years ago. What would he say? He was a man of few words, first of all. But he'd just shake his head like, *This is crazy*. Which it is. It's nuts.

SI: But these are the rules of engagement, right?

CC: You like what you're doing? Yeah. I'm doing what I've always wanted to do, right? We're on a big stage here at the Big Ten, right? I'm organized and structured and it doesn't bother me. I've just got to make sure I've got enough funds to be successful.

SI: What's the best piece of advice your dad gave you about going into this line of work?

CC: I remember he said, "Don't do it unless you can't live without it," because back then, you were gonna go five or six or seven years before you made any kind of money.

SI: What's your favorite coaching catchphrase?

CC: We got a lot of them. Our style: *Play fast, physical, relentless*. You know, *Everything is earned and not given*. That's good. There's a million of them, you know.

SI: What's the role of joy? It's serious business, but there's got to be some levity. How do you balance those two?

CC: My mother says, "Make sure you smile on TV." Other people say, "Make sure you take time to enjoy it." And I do enjoy it. It's just that there's always something to do next. □

TIM WARNER/GETTY IMAGES

No. 1 team.

No pressure at all on the scion of the famous Manning quarterback family, who is following in the positional footsteps of grandpa Archie and uncles Peyton and Eli.

Is Bryce Underwood game-ready now? The top recruit in the class of 2025 enrolled early at Michigan and could take over a shockingly weak QB position. (Davis Warren, who

ARCH, BACK

Manning, who threw for 939 yards and nine TDs in limited action as a sophomore, should take over in Austin.

was ineffective in nine starts last year, tore his ACL in December.) Underwood has all the tools; it's just a question of how quickly he can assimilate to the college game.

A QB battle at Notre Dame. Steve Angeli, who had a brief-but-vital star turn in relief in the College Football Playoff, will compete with 2024 star recruit CJ Carr, who endured an elbow injury last season. Can either player put a lock on the position, or will the battle continue into August? The one who doesn't win the job could be a hot commodity on the transfer market. □

POINT AFTER

YOGI FLAIR

IN 1985, AS TODAY, THE METS HAD MLB'S MOST EYE-POPPING PLAYER

THIS SPRING Mets fans have high hopes, thanks to the addition of a rare talent with amazing physical skills. They've been down this road before, never more intensely—or briefly—than 40 years ago.

That was the year the world met Hayden Siddhartha Finch, who went by Sidd and possessed a 168-mph fastball. Finch was a 28-year-old, Harvard-educated French horn–playing yogi with no baseball experience. He pitched wearing a hiking boot on one foot and nothing on the other. He was too good to be true, because of course he wasn't.

Finch was the invention of George Plimpton, who wrote a 14-page story for the April 1, 1985, issue of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED. The fact that it was a hoax should have been obvious—the first letters of the story's subhead spelled out HAPPY APRIL FOOLS DAY—but plenty of people bit (including the office of one of New York's U.S. senators), thanks to the fact that the team played along and the wonderful photographs of Lane Stewart, who recruited a friend, art teacher Joe Berton, to play Finch *(below)*.

Sidd's career didn't pan out—SI announced his retirement a week later. But even without their new star the Mets gave their fans something to believe in: They won the World Series a year later.

To read the story of Sidd Finch, go to **si.com/finch**

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NO TOUCHING SHOES.
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HANDS FREE
Slip-ins

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